



Below the Belt

*Digestive trouble is common,
but persistent symptoms shouldn't be ignored*

According to recent research, Americans spend more than 30 minutes each day – nearly eight days a year – in the bathroom.

The digestive system is large and complex so, when digestive problems occur, they can have a significant adverse effect on our overall health. It's no wonder digestive problems are one of the most common health ailments in America. In fact, more than 70 million Americans suffer from one of several common digestive problems that limit their activities and affect their quality of life.

Many things can disrupt the normal function of the digestive system, including diet, disease and stress. Digestive conditions are increasingly common as we age. According to research from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, more than 40 percent of older adults have one or more symptoms of digestive disorders each year – indigestion, constipation/diarrhea, abdominal pain or gas. As we get older, muscle tone in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract decreases, so food moves through our digestive system more slowly and the contractions necessary for the movement and breakdown of food become weaker.

Some digestive problems can be solved simply with lifestyle changes. Others require a doctor's care or surgical intervention. Digestive issues can originate in the mouth, throat, esophagus (the tube between the throat and stomach), stomach or intestines. A few of the most common disorders include heartburn, upset stomach, constipation/diarrhea, ulcers, and hemorrhoids, well as, bowel cancer and inflammatory diseases and infections.

Heartburn – also known as indigestion or acid reflux – is the back-up of stomach acid into the esophagus, characterized by a burning pain in the chest behind the breastbone. Usually occurring after overeating, it is often worse when lying down. Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is a more serious form of reflux, and is sometimes heralded by a dry cough or trouble swallowing. In addition to overeating, it can also be caused by obesity, pregnancy or smoking. It is also triggered by certain foods: citrus; chocolate; fried, fatty or

spicy foods; or alcohol. Antacids, H2 blockers, or proton pump inhibitors can control symptoms. Left untreated, GERD can develop into a more serious condition called

Learn more by visiting www.themedcenter.net and clicking on Health Resources to take an interactive quiz about the digestive process, causes of diarrhea, or signs and symptoms of celiac disease.

Barrett's Esophagitis, in which cells in the esophagus undergo changes that increase the risk of esophageal cancer.

Digestive upset can often cause constipation or diarrhea. Other possible side effects include bloating or lethargy. Many things can affect the bowels, including your diet, the amount of water you drink, how often you exercise, certain medications or dietary supplements, and whether you have sufficient fiber in your diet. Diarrhea is generally caused by a bacterial or viral infection, food intolerances or parasites. Cramping, nausea, abdominal pain, and the persistent urge to go to the bathroom are common symptoms. Diarrhea can also cause dehydration – so, if diarrhea persists for more than three days or if it is profuse or bloody, alert your doctor. Chronic diarrhea can also be a sign of a more serious condition known as irritable bowel syndrome, or other more rare conditions, such as insufficient blood supply to the bowel and certain bowel tumors.

More serious conditions that also afflict the digestive system include:

Lactose intolerance. Lactose intolerance is the deficiency of an enzyme in the small intestine that aids your body's digestion of lactose in milk and milk products. It can be inherited or develop through injury to the small intestine through severe diarrhea or other medical problems. Symptoms include abdominal pain, bloating and gas. Lactose intolerance can usually be controlled through dietary changes or medication.

Irritable bowel syndrome. IBS is one of the most common digestive disorders. Symptoms include cramping, bloating, constipation and diarrhea. IBS is more common in women and can usually be controlled with diet, stress management and medications.

Peptic ulcer. A peptic ulcer usually occurs in the lining of your stomach or small intestine. Also called a gastric ulcer when it occurs in the stomach, it is caused by bacterial infection or overuse of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen. Ulcers that occur in the small intestine are called duodenal ulcers. Symptoms include pain in the midsection between meals or during the night. This pain may radiate to the back. The pain may come and go for weeks or months. Other symptoms include weight loss, bloating, nausea/vomiting, bloating or burping frequently. Rarely ulcers cause bleeding in the bowel, which is manifested by black stool or maroon colored stool. Should either of these symptoms occur you should call your doctor's office or report to the emergency room.

Celiac disease. This hereditary disorder, also known as gluten intolerance, is the inability to digest gluten – a protein found in wheat, rye or barley. People with celiac disease must eat a gluten-free diet. Celiac disease damages the lining of the small intestine, inhibiting the body's ability to absorb necessary nutrients from food and causing anemia, malnutrition, and other health issues. People with the disease are sometimes unaware they have it, because they have no symptoms, or symptoms that are common to other digestive problems: gas, diarrhea, stomach pain, fatigue, moodiness, and weight loss.

Ulcerative colitis. This inflammatory bowel disease causes sores in the lining of the colon and rectum which turn to ulcers. This causes the colon to empty frequently, resulting in diarrhea that is often bloody. Believed to be hereditary, ulcerative colitis can occur at any age, but usually between ages 15 and 30. Symptoms include anemia, fatigue, weight loss, decreased appetite, rectal bleeding, skin lesions and joint pain.

Crohn's Disease. This chronic inflammatory bowel disease causes inflammation or blockage of the small intestine, mouth, esophagus or stomach, as well as the colon and rectum. Effects include swelling, pain and diarrhea. Also thought to be hereditary, Crohn's can develop at any age but most often is diagnosed in the 20s and 30s. In addition to nutritional complications, Crohn's patients suffer from skin problems, eye or mouth inflammation, abdominal pain and rectal bleeding. The condition is managed with medication, or nutritional supplements or a combination of all three. Usually, surgical treatment is reserved for severe complications.

If you're experiencing any of the symptoms associated with these digestive diseases, don't suffer in silence. Ask for a referral to one of our doctors today at 864-3245 to find help in managing your symptoms and ruling out a more serious disorder.

Remember that this information is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor, but rather to increase awareness and help equip patients with information to facilitate conversations with their physician.

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Sources: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease, www.niddk.nih.gov; WebMD, www.webmd.com