

Stomach Troubles

General Advice for Indigestion and Heartburn

When you have stomach symptoms, think of it as a message from your stomach saying “you’re hurting me, I don’t like what you’re putting into me”. So change your diet.

For most people their stomach symptoms will **go away in 2 weeks by stopping soda drinks, sugar, processed foods, white bread, white flour, chips, fried foods, cereals alcohol, cigarettes and coffee**. During this time increase fruits and vegetables. Ideally these should make up 50% of the diet. Also stop aspirin and anti-inflammatory drugs if you’re taking them. **Avoid any drinks with your meals**; take your drink later as drinking dilutes the gastric juices (see below). Snacking between meals makes the situation worse as it doesn’t give the stomach a rest.

Specific Foods

Although processed foods are often the most harmful, there are exceptions. Citrus fruits such as lemons, limes and oranges can be a problem as can tomatoes, raw onion and raw garlic. Wine and fizzy drinks are highly irritant. Caffeine, vinegar, processed oils (eg sunflower, safflower), chocolate and most alcoholic drinks are also irritant. High fructose corn syrup (found in most processed food) is bad news. Foods which are more healing include most fruit and vegetable, nuts, seeds, wholegrains, fish, poultry and most cheeses.

Food Combinations

For some people the way you combine foods can contribute to problems. **FRUIT** is a bad mixer, especially apples and bananas. So eat fruit away from meals. **STARCH** is also a bad mixer. It doesn’t mix well with meat (eg meat pies), it doesn’t mix well with sugar (eg. cakes) and it doesn’t mix well with other starches (eg Indian meal with bread and rice). Vegetables mix well with everything.

Food Intolerances

A fairly common reason for recurrent stomach pains is food allergies. This can cause wind, bloating, and sometimes irregular bowels. It is the likely cause if you get other allergies, if you eat the same food every day or if you crave certain foods. The best way to find if you have a food allergy is to do exclusion diet (see separate leaflet). Identifying this may save you years of trouble.

The Mind and Stomach

If you eat fast or under stress you won’t make enough saliva and food wont be digested properly, wont be absorbed properly. You will put out excess

cortisol which makes your digestion worse. You also need oxygen to digest your food so your breathing makes a difference. Eating fast is regarded by the body as stressful. You can aid your digestion simply by taking about 5 slow deep breaths before eating, always sitting down to eat, ideally in pleasant surroundings, and taking plenty of time over your food. These changes alone can sometimes make a big difference.

Too much Acid or Too Little

Stomach acid goes down with age. Low stomach acid has been associated with a wide range of auto-immune and chronic diseases including arthritis, diabetes, hyperthyroidism, eczema, asthma, gallstones, macular degeneration, ulcerative colitis, rosacea and osteoporosis. The majority of people with stomach troubles have too little acid. Symptoms like wind and bloating are associated with impaired digestion and are more likely to be linked with low than high stomach acid.

Normally the stomach empties into the duodenum via the pyloric valve. However this is acid-sensitive and only opens when there is enough acid. If there isn't enough acid, food isn't released and it gets pushed back into the oesophagus. Even though the stomach contents are less acid, it is still acid enough to burn the oesophagus and cause heartburn. Acid blocking drugs will work here as they block this acid but at the expense of worsening digestion throughout the rest of the intestine.

Normally acid released from the stomach leads to a whole cascade of essential changes such as the release of bicarbonate, bile acids and pancreatic enzymes in the small bowel. If you block acid it interferes with all these stages of digestion and reduces absorption of protein, fats and minerals.

A simple test you can do to check the amount of stomach acid is to take a half of a teaspoonful of bicarbonate of soda in 250 mls (8 ounces) of water first thing in the morning before eating. Now measure the time before you start belching or burping (this is due to the stomach acid and bicarbonate reacting). 1 to 2 minutes is normal whereas 2-5 minutes means a slightly low level and over 5 minutes means a low level. Ideally repeat this test for 5 days. This works because sodium bicarbonate reacts with stomach acid to produce carbon dioxide, hence the wind.

Gut Fermentation

If wind and bloating are major symptoms then sometimes the problem lies not in the stomach but in the small intestine. Normally this should be free of microbes but if stomach acid is low or the diet is high in sugar (which feeds the microbes) or bile secretion is impaired (for instance after gall bladder removal) then bacteria can take hold in the small intestine and produce a variety of harmful chemicals including alcohols and hydrogen sulphide (so the wind is smelly). (See separate gut fermentation leaflet).

Other Remedies

Celery Juice – a glass of freshly made celery juice in the morning using a juicer is an excellent way to correct stomach acidity. Use this on its own, not combined with other juices.

Lemon juice (squeeze of this in water 10 minutes before food) is also good.

Other remedies include aloe vera (liquid or capsules), ginger tea and papaya or pineapple (which contain digestive enzymes).

Freshly squeezed cabbage juice has been shown to heal an ulcer in two to five days. It doesn't taste too good so add in carrots or celery.

Deglycyrrhized licorice (DGL) has been found to be as good as any known stomach drug and articles on its effectiveness have appeared in medical journals for over 35 years. It can be hard to obtain. It will heal indigestion and ulcers. It does not stop acid production but helps produce a protective mucus in the stomach. It is also good at killing harmful bugs in the stomach and makes the liver work better. Unlike most drugs which turn off normal functions of the body it actually helps the body.

Digestive Enzymes – these are often helpful and are available from health food shops. Many people have low levels of enzymes and benefit from supplementing before meals. They help absorption of food and also help absorption of vitamins and minerals.

Chinese Perspective

The eastern perspective is that you need digestive fire to absorb food. Cold foods or too much food put out this fire whereas warm foods make digestion easier. The fire is highest at midday (when the sun is highest) and then declines. So eating the biggest meal at lunchtime helps. A tip to stimulate the digestive fire is to take a few slices of ginger with a sprinkle of lemon juice and a pinch of salt 20-30 minutes before meals.

Antacids

Take care when you use antacids. Most tablets and a few mixtures contain **aluminium**. Over time aluminium can accumulate in your brain and lead to Alzheimer's disease. Read the labels and avoid those with aluminium. You can safely use simple mixtures such as Milk of Magnesia. Or you can make your own by adding a teaspoonful of sodium bicarbonate to a glass of warm water. This is the same as Alka-Seltzer without the fizz and the aspirin.

H2 Blockers and PPIs

These are strong drugs. H2 Blockers like cimetidine (Tagamet) and ranitidine (Zantac) block acid secretion as do PPIs such as omeprazole (Losec) and lansoprazole (Zoton) which block acid far more. However a study in the British Medical Journal found a 50% increase in mortality for those on PPIs compared to those on H2 blockers. These drugs are often very effective at stopping symptoms. But there is a price to pay. You need acid to digest food

properly and to absorb nutrients, particularly vitamin B12, calcium and amino acids (key proteins). The standard recommendation for PPIs is that they should not be taken for more than 8 weeks. Osteoporosis is a recognised problem when these drugs are used long-term. You also need acid to protect your gut against bacteria and fungi.

A further problem is that symptoms can rebound when you stop taking drugs. **So only use these drugs as long as you need to take them, then gradually cut down and stop them.**