



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
UNIVERSITY HEALTH SERVICES HEALTH PROMOTION RESOURCE CENTER
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DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS

The common digestive problems that affect college students are more numerous than you might think. Many can be treated using nutrition, lifestyle changes, and/or medication. **To schedule an appointment with a UHS healthcare provider to discuss your specific symptoms, concerns, or treatment, call 471-4955.** Treatment almost always involves diet modifications. **While general dietary suggestions are listed below, your healthcare provider can refer you to a registered dietitian for specific recommendations.** For information on individual consultations with a UHS dietitian, see our nutrition programs page using the link at the top or bottom of this page.

Celiac Disease / Gluten Intolerance

Celiac disease is a disorder characterized by intolerance to a protein found in wheat called gluten, which when eaten damages the lining of the small intestine. It is an autoimmune disorder, meaning that the body attacks itself. Celiac disease is also thought to be hereditary. Common symptoms include diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, abdominal distension (bloating), and fatigue. Diet modification is the primary treatment for celiac disease.

Diet suggestions include:

- Completely avoid any products containing wheat gluten.
- Use nutrient supplements as necessary.

For more information, visit the Celiac Disease Foundation.

www.celiac.org

Constipation

Constipation means infrequent or difficult bowel movements. Common causes include inadequate fiber, low physical activity, dehydration, and certain medications. Symptoms include bloating, feeling of a full bowel, pain during bowel movements, and straining while eliminating a stool. Constipation is treated with diet modifications, increased physical activity, and occasionally stool softeners or laxatives. Medications should not be used for long periods of time.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Increase fiber.
- Drink more fluids, primarily water.

For more information, visit the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/constipation>

Crohn's Disease and Ulcerative Colitis / Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)

Crohn's disease refers to chronic inflammation of any part of the gastrointestinal tract, but most often of the small intestine and/or colon (part of the large intestine). Ulcerative colitis refers to chronic inflammation of just the colon. The lining of the affected areas can eventually tear, which prevents proper function. Both are considered "inflammatory bowel diseases" (IBD). The cause is thought to be that the body's immune system mistakes normal, naturally occurring microbes for foreign invaders and attacks them. Genetic and environmental factors may also be involved. Common symptoms include cramping pain, rectal bleeding, fever, weight loss, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and persistent watery diarrhea. Both diseases are treated with medications and/or surgery as necessary. Diet modifications can manage the symptoms and correct nutrient deficiencies.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Get enough fluids.
- Use nutrient supplements as necessary.
- Identify and limit irritating foods and food groups.
- Prevent excessive weight loss.

For more information, visit the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America.

www.ccfa.org

Diarrhea

Diarrhea refers to frequent watery, loose stools. Common causes include bacterial or viral infections, parasites, food intolerances, and bowel disorders. Bloating, nausea, and abdominal pain generally accompany the loose stools. Treating the underlying cause is the primary treatment goal. Diet modifications are used to manage symptoms and correct nutrient deficiencies.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Prevent dehydration by drinking fluids to replace what is lost.
- Limit what you eat to clear liquids as necessary.
- Choose easy to digest foods when able to eat.
- Avoid caffeine, high-fat foods, alcohol, spicy foods, most vegetables, and dairy as necessary until normal digestive function returns.
- Consume yogurt or other dairy products with acidophilus (healthy bacteria) once stools are normal.
- Prevent diarrhea by getting enough fiber in your diet.

For more information, visit the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/diarrhea>

Food Allergies

Food allergies occur when the body's immune system responds to a food that it mistakenly believes to be harmful. The most common food allergies include eggs, milk, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, fish, shellfish, and wheat. Common symptoms of an allergic reaction include a tingling sensation in the mouth, swelling of the throat, breathing difficulties, hives, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and diarrhea. Severe food allergies can result in death. The allergic response is treated with medications and prevented with diet modification.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Eliminate the specific food or foods that cause a reaction.

For more information, visit The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network.
www.foodallergy.org

Food Poisoning

Food poisoning is a temporary illness caused by consuming food or beverages that are contaminated with bacteria or toxins. It is caused by unsanitary food handling and cooking methods. Pregnant women, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems may be more susceptible to food poisoning. Symptoms vary according to the specific bacteria or toxin, but can include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, bloody stools, fever, and weakness. Diet modifications are used to treat specific symptoms and will vary accordingly.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Use sanitary food handling and cooking methods to prevent food poisoning (PDF).

For more information, visit the Partnership for Food Safety Education.
www.fightbac.org

Gas

Gas refers to the release of air from the gastrointestinal tract. Gas is primarily caused by swallowed air and/or digestive difficulties. Symptoms include abdominal pain, bloating, distension, burping, and flatulence (intestinal gas). Excessive gas production is treated through the correction of contributing problems. Treatment can include diet modification, increased physical activity, and stress management. Over-the-counter medications are available to encourage the healthy digestion of aggravating foods.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Identify and limit irritating foods and food groups.
- Eat a well balanced diet.
- Drink fewer carbonated beverages if helpful.

For more information, visit the American College of Gastroenterology.
www.gi.org/patients/gihealth/belching.asp

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD) / Indigestion / Heartburn

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) refers to the frequent backflow of stomach acid into the esophagus. Common causes include excess weight, pregnancy, eating habits and posture, and stress. Smoking and drinking alcohol tend to exacerbate GERD. Common symptoms include a burning pain in the stomach or chest, bloating, burping, nausea, and vomiting (small amounts generally). GERD is treated through stress management, weight management, smoking cessation, diet modifications, and medications as necessary.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Improve posture before and after eating.
- Reduce physical activity after meals.
- Reserve liquids for between meals.
- Identify and limit irritating foods or food groups.
- Lose weight if necessary.
- Reduce alcohol as necessary.

For more information, visit the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/gerd>

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) / Spastic Colon

Irritable Bowel Syndrome refers to inflammation and spasms of the digestive tract, particularly the colon (part of the large intestine). Common causes of IBS include anxiety, stress, and inadequate dietary fiber. Common symptoms include abdominal pain, abdominal bloating, nausea, constipation, and diarrhea. It is treated through stress management, regular exercise, diet modification, and medications if necessary.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Increase dietary fiber.
- Identify and limit irritating foods or food groups.
- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Maintain a regular eating schedule.
- Consider taking omega-3 fatty acid supplements.

For more information, visit the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/ibs_ez

Lactose Intolerance

Lactose intolerance is the inability to digest lactose due to a lack of the necessary digestive enzyme called lactase. Lactose is the sugar that comes from milk. Common symptoms include nausea, abdominal cramps, bloating, gas, and diarrhea. Lactose intolerance is treated through diet modification and lactase supplementation.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Limit or eliminate foods that contain lactose.
- Get enough calcium and vitamin D.
- Eat small, frequent meals.

For more information, visit the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/lactoseintolerance>

Peptic Ulcers

A peptic ulcer refers to a break or tear in the lining of the stomach or small intestine. Common causes include excess stomach acid secretion, an overgrowth of bacteria that naturally live in the lining of the stomach or small intestine, and certain medications. Common symptoms include a burning pain somewhere between the breastbone and bellybutton, nausea, vomiting, blood in the stool, and loss of appetite. Peptic ulcers are treated with certain medications, smoking cessation, and surgery if necessary. Diet modifications are used to manage the symptoms and correct nutrient deficiencies.

Dietary suggestions include:

- Eat small, frequent meals.
- Eat slowly.
- Identify and limit irritating foods and food groups.
- Use nutrient supplements as necessary.

For more information, visit the American Gastroenterological Association.
www.gastro.org/wmspage.cfm?parm1=856