

GO

WITH

YOUR

GUT

Gastrointestinal symptoms you can't ignore

We've all experienced that awkward moment when your belly rumbled during a job interview or forced you to rush out of the movie theater in search of the nearest bathroom, causing you to miss the most exciting scene of a movie. If you suffer from gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms, such as gas, constipation or diarrhea, you are definitely not alone. Your doctor can determine if your symptoms are warning signs of serious GI problems that require treatment.

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THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH.

Even though GI disorders are common, many of us are embarrassed to talk about our symptoms, even with our doctor. GI problems can be uncomfortable and disruptive. For example, irritable bowel syndrome, one of the most common GI disorders, is a leading cause of people missing work.

Here's what you need to know: although you might be embarrassed talking about diarrhea or bloody stools, your doctor is not embarrassed. He or she has seen it all and then some. Those cringe-worthy signs are actually important clues as to what's going on in your body. By not sharing them, you risk having your doctor miss a potentially serious problem. In fact, GI problems are not the only cause of abdominal symptoms—conditions affecting the uterus and ovaries can produce similar warning signs. If you're still uncomfortable talking about the details, try writing them out and give the list to your doctor. Seeking medical attention can relieve your discomfort, improve your quality of life, and address the underlying cause of the problem.

When should you see a doctor?

Everyone experiences the occasional bout of GI misery, especially if we are under stress or eat something that doesn't quite agree with us. However, if symptoms persist, or disrupt your daily activities, it's time to see the doctor.

Serious GI symptoms require prompt medical attention. These include:

- Blood in your stool
- Change in bowel habits
- Persistent heartburn (acid reflux)
- Difficulty swallowing
- Incontinence
- Nausea or vomiting (especially if you have blood in your vomit)
- Unexpected weight gain or loss

ACTIONITEMS

Keep a record of your symptoms, including what you ate and when your symptoms occurred. This will help your doctor make an accurate diagnosis. Ask your doctor how you can reduce your risk for colorectal cancer and when you should begin screening.

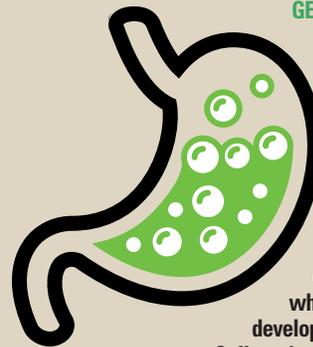
COMMON GASTROINTESTINAL DISORDERS INCLUDE:



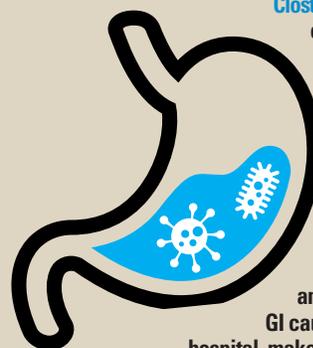
Colorectal cancer (CRC). More than half of all GI cancers are cancers of the colon and rectum. CRC is the fourth most frequently diagnosed cancer, accounting for eight percent of all new cancer cases in 2016. The good news is that screening reduces deaths from CRC. You can actually lower your risk for developing CRC by not smoking, eating a healthy diet, and getting regular exercise. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends adults at average risk begin screening at age 50 (45 for African Americans). The frequency of screening depends on the type of test.



Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Ten to 15 percent of U.S. adults have IBS, especially women. IBS describes a group of symptoms that includes abdominal pain or discomfort and changes in bowel patterns. You may have diarrhea or constipation (or both), bloating, whitish mucous in your stool and the feeling you haven't finished a bowel movement. IBS is treatable. If you suspect you have IBS, keep a diary of what you eat and when you have symptoms and then see your doctor.



GER and GERD. Gastroesophageal reflux (GER) occurs when the contents of your stomach back up into your esophagus, causing heartburn (acid reflux). Occasional incidents of GER are not cause for alarm. However, repeated GER may lead to gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), a more serious form of acid reflux. Approximately 20 percent of the population suffers from GERD and it's the most common GI diagnosis. Without treatment, GERD can eventually cause serious complications. People who are overweight or smoke are more likely to develop GERD. Avoid foods that cause GER or make it worse. Coffee, chocolate, tomato products, and greasy foods are some of the most common triggers.



Clostridium difficile infections (also called *C. difficile* or *C. diff*). *C. diff* is a bacterium found in feces that causes inflammation of the colon. Traditionally, the elderly were most at risk, especially those taking antibiotics. Although about 80 percent of *C. diff* infections are transmitted in health-care settings, the rise of antibiotic-resistant strains of *C. diff* is causing an increase in infections among those not normally at risk. Hospitalizations and death from *C. diff* infections doubled between 2002 and 2012 and *C. diff* infections are now the ninth leading GI cause of death. If you or a loved one is in the hospital, make sure your healthcare providers clean their hands thoroughly before and after treating you.