

# gut reactions

Whether your stomach hurts or just feels off, we'll help you pinpoint the problem and find the right treatment.

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Too many women feel lousy but never see their doctor about it.

## ➔ You feel bloated.

The main symptoms of bloat are feeling full to the point of discomfort and abdominal pain that's anywhere from mild to painful. Bloat happens when you don't expel gas, so it builds up in your stomach and intestines.

Women are more susceptible to bloat than men are because of hormonal changes related to menstruation or pregnancy: Roller-coaster hormone levels can slow the gastrointestinal tract and may prevent gas from passing properly.

But even when your stomach feels huge, it doesn't necessarily mean it is. "Your belly may *feel* bigger because of gas, or due to increased fluid retention before your period," explains gastroenterologist Jacqueline Wolf, M.D., author of *A Woman's Guide to a Healthy Stomach*. A distended belly, though, has actually increased in girth. If your stomach is distended, it's likely because the gas has been redistributed to the small bowel. See your doctor if you feel bloated more days than not or if you also experience weight loss, chronic diarrhea, constipation, or frequent heartburn.

## WHAT CAN HELP

\* Watch out for surprising culprits like bananas, pretzels, cabbage, and raisins, in addition to known gas bombs like legumes, onions, and brussels sprouts. And of course, slash your salt intake to reduce water retention.

\* Cut back on gas-causing sugars like sorbitol in sugar-free products, lactose in dairy products, and fructose in soft drinks. Avoid chewing gum too, because it causes you to swallow air.

\* Speak with your doctor about getting more probiotics in your diet. Commonly found in yogurt and supplements, these helpful bacteria may ease gas and bloating. Studies have shown that probiotics with a bifidobacterium strain can diminish GI symptoms.

### ➔ Your stomach hurts after you eat dairy.

Up to 50 million Americans are lactose intolerant, meaning they lack the enzyme called lactase needed to digest lactose, a sugar found in dairy products. The problem is most common among African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. “Lactose intolerance can develop gradually with age or come on suddenly after an intestinal illness,” says Dr. Wolf. You can experience bloating, diarrhea, nausea, and gas. A doctor-administered breath test or stool test can diagnose the problem, but if you don’t want to wait for an appointment, you can go dairy-free for a week and see whether symptoms resolve. If your stomach rebels when you reintroduce dairy, you’re probably lactose intolerant.

#### WHAT CAN HELP

- \* Talk to your doctor about taking over-the-counter lactase tablets before eating dairy foods. Consider trying lactose-free milk too.
- \* Avoid lactose, milk, whey, and curds in prepared foods like breads, cereals, salad dressings, and even nondairy creamers.
- \* Have a conversation with your pharmacist if your problem is severe. Lactose is found in about

20 percent of prescription drugs (including many birth-control pills) and 6 percent of over-the-counter meds like antacids, so you may need to make a switch.

### ➔ You feel pain in your upper right abdomen that lasts for hours.

Gallstones—hardened clusters of bile that contain either cholesterol or bilirubin—are three times more likely to occur in women than men. It can happen anytime but is common during pregnancy because rising estrogen levels slow the movement of bile through the gallbladder. (Hormonal contraceptives can have the same effect.) You may never know you have gallstones unless one blocks a bile duct and causes a gallbladder attack. Call your doctor immediately if you experience that steady pain in your right upper abdomen, or pain under your right shoulder or between your shoulders; nausea and vomiting; fever; and/or clay-colored stools. If the stone doesn’t pass, your gallbladder may need to be surgically removed before it becomes infected or ruptures.

#### WHAT CAN HELP

- \* Lose the baby weight sensibly. Excess weight is a major risk factor, but your liver secretes extra cholesterol into bile when you fast or go on a crash diet.
- \* Consider hormone-free birth control, such as a copper IUD, a diaphragm, or a cervical cap, if you’re at high risk for gallstones due to genetics (they often run in families) or ethnicity (American Indians and Mexican Americans are most susceptible).
- \* Eat a low-fat diet to make it easier for your gallbladder to get rid of bile.

### ➔ You’re constipated.

The widely accepted definition of constipation is when you have fewer than three bowel movements



## When Stomach Pain Is Serious

If your bloating or discomfort is accompanied by any of these symptoms, see your doctor:

- Fever that’s persistent or recurrent
- Vomiting for longer than 24 hours
- Vomiting blood and/or bile
- Stools that are bloody or black and tarry
- A very tender abdomen or pain when you push on your abdomen and quickly release your hand
- Pain following an abdominal injury
- Stomach pain that interferes with sleep or daily activities
- Unexplained weight loss
- Difficulty swallowing or a feeling that something is caught in your chest or throat
- Persistent chest discomfort
- Headache and stiff neck
- Signs of dehydration (including dry mouth, infrequent or dark-yellow urine, and sunken eyes)

\* To beat bloat, cut back on sugars that cause gas: sorbitol in sugar-free products, lactose in dairy products, and fructose in soft drinks. Avoid chewing gum too—it makes you swallow air.

a week or have stools that are hard, dry, and small, making them difficult to pass. You may also have cramps and feel like you can't completely empty your bowels. Up to 20 percent of women get constipated, and the problem is especially common during pregnancy. High progesterone levels, as well as pressure from your expanding uterus, are among the causes of a sluggish digestive tract, says Linda A. Lee, M.D., director of the Johns Hopkins Integrative Medicine & Digestive Center, in Maryland. Extra iron in prenatal and multivitamins is another factor.

#### WHAT CAN HELP

- \* Get at least 20 grams of fiber a day via whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and nuts. If needed, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about fiber supplements.
- \* Check your medications. Certain antidepressants, painkillers, antacids, calcium supplements, and antihistamines can stop things up. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about switching meds.
- \* Laxatives loosen stool and increase the number of bowel movements, but certain ones can stimulate uterine contractions during pregnancy and cause dehydration. Stool softeners draw water from the intestines and moisten stools, making them easier to pass. If you're pregnant, nursing, or already have a health problem, talk to your doctor before using these products.

#### ➔ You have unexplained abdominal pain or discomfort at least three times a month for three months in a row (that may get better after a bowel movement).

This is how doctors diagnose irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). No one's pinpointed the exact cause of this illness, but one thing is clear: The intestinal tract of some IBS sufferers reacts poorly to stress. "Your colon responds to the sympathetic nervous system, so when your brain and body feel tension, so may your gut," says Dr. Lee. Symptoms can vary from mild stomachaches to severe, can't-leave-the-bathroom diarrhea flare-ups. IBS typically appears before age 35 and affects about twice as many women as men. Because IBS is a group of symptoms rather than a disease, doctors rely on your medical history to make a diagnosis.

#### WHAT CAN HELP

- \* Ask your doctor about options including medications, such as hyoscine, cimetropium, and pinaverium, to help control colon muscle spasms; antibiotics for bloating; and antidiarrheals like Imodium or Pepto-Bismol.
- \* Alleviate stress with exercise, meditation, massage, and yoga.
- \* Avoid (or limit) fatty foods, chocolate, alcohol, dairy products, and caffeinated or carbonated drinks; they can worsen symptoms.
- \* Peppermint is known to relax

intestinal muscles. Look for enteric-coated capsules, which dissolve in the intestines, not the stomach. First check with your doctor, though—and skip this if you suffer from heartburn.

#### ➔ You feel nausea and heartburn or chest pain below or behind your sternum.

These are the hallmarks of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Other symptoms—which many affected people don't immediately associate with reflux—include sour taste in the mouth, dry cough, regurgitation of food or liquid, a sensation that food is stuck in your throat or chest, and feeling full even when you haven't eaten much (or at all). An estimated 60 percent of Americans suffer from heartburn intermittently; 7 percent deal with it on a daily basis. The symptoms occur because a valve separating the stomach and the esophagus is weakened, allowing irritating stomach acid or food to flow back up into the esophagus, explains Dr. Wolf. Heartburn is common during pregnancy.

#### WHAT CAN HELP

- \* Try avoiding food and drinks that are known to trigger heartburn, including fatty/fried foods, tomato sauce, alcohol, chocolate, and anything that contains caffeine.
- \* Wear loose-fitting clothes to prevent pressure on your abdomen.
- \* Elevate the head of your bed 6 to 8 inches with risers (sold at bedding and furniture stores) to prevent nighttime reflux. Extra pillows don't prop up your chest enough.
- \* Over-the-counter antacids help, but they shouldn't be a long-term solution. Talk to your doctor about taking an H<sub>2</sub> blocker such as ranitidine (Zantac); if that doesn't work, try a proton-pump inhibitor like omeprazole (Prilosec). ❌