

Let's Talk...

LET'S
TALK
GUTS

The Gutsy Glossary

At Guts UK, we believe it's time to shake off the taboo and shape the conversation surrounding our digestive health. It's time to get to know our guts better, so we feel more comfortable talking about them. After all, our guts are fascinating and complex systems that work tirelessly behind the scenes every single day. And when things go wrong, it can feel confusing and overwhelming, especially when it comes to being able to explain our symptoms or understand complex medical terms.

This glossary is for you if:

- ✓ You have digestive symptoms.
- ✓ You are awaiting a diagnosis.
- ✓ You live with a digestive condition.
- ✓ You are a family member, friend or colleague looking to better understand and support someone else.
- ✓ You simply want to get to know your gut better.

Think of this as your go-to guide...

... to better understanding your gut and finding the confidence to have open conversations. This could be at home, in your workplace or with your GP. Because when we find the right words to talk about our guts, we take the first step towards getting the right information and support, earlier diagnoses and treatment. Let's talk guts!



A

Acid reflux

Acid reflux is a symptom and it happens when the one-way muscular ring between your food pipe (oesophagus) and stomach doesn't close properly, allowing acid stomach contents to travel the wrong way up your food pipe (oesophagus).

A gutsy tip:

For most people it's a nuisance, but persistent reflux should be checked. To manage it, try eating your evening meal at least three hours before bedtime and avoid eating beyond fullness.

Achalasia

A rare condition affecting the nerves and muscles of the food pipe (oesophagus). It stops the muscle from squeezing food through properly and prevents the valve at the bottom from relaxing. This makes it difficult for food and drink to enter the stomach.

Why it matters:

The most common symptom is difficulty swallowing (dysphagia). Because it's a rare condition, diagnosis can often be delayed. Raising awareness helps people to get the care they need sooner.



B

Bile

A natural, bitter fluid produced by the liver and stored in the gallbladder. It is released into the small intestine to help your body break down and digest fats.

Did you know?

Sometimes, nerves in the stomach can become overly sensitive to natural fluids like bile or acid, causing indigestion symptoms even when everything structurally looks normal. This is known as functional indigestion (dyspepsia) symptoms.

Bloating

An uncomfortable feeling of fullness, pressure or trapped gas in the belly. It's incredibly common, affecting about 4 in 10 people. It is also frequently linked to the way the brain and gut communicate with each other.

A gutsy tip:

Bloating is the sensation of fullness. It can happen on its own or alongside distension (where the tummy physically swells outwards). It is worth getting it checked out if it persists.

Bowel cancer

One of the most common cancers in the UK, where cells in the large bowel grow uncontrollably, usually starting as small, non-cancerous bumps called polyps.

Why it matters:

If detected early, 9 in 10 people could have curative treatment. If you notice any unusual changes in your bowel habits lasting four weeks or more, or if you notice blood in your poo, don't delay talking to a doctor.



Coeliac disease

An autoimmune condition where eating gluten (a protein found in wheat, barley and rye) causes the body's immune system to mistake its own healthy gut tissue for a threat, damaging the lining of the small intestine.

Why it matters:

It is not an allergy or a food intolerance. Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune condition that requires a strict gluten-free diet to allow the gut to heal. If you suspect coeliac disease, don't exclude gluten before seeing your doctor.

Constipation

A very common digestive symptom where bowel movements become infrequent, difficult to pass, or feel incomplete. Poo is often hard, dry or lumpy.

A gutsy tip:

Keeping your fibre intake up and drinking at least eight glasses of fluids a day helps fibre move through your gut smoothly. Increase any fibre slowly to help your gut to adjust to a new level. If constipation lasts for four weeks or more, it's known as chronic and could be the sign of a digestive condition, so don't delay speaking to your doctor.



Crohn's disease

A chronic (long-term) type of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). It causes inflammation, deep ulcers and swelling that can affect any part of the digestive tract from the mouth to the anus, but most commonly the small and large intestine.

Why it matters:

Symptoms can flare up and then go into periods where they are less active or go away (remission). If you know someone with Crohn's disease, understanding the way that it can impact them can make a huge difference in helping them to manage daily life.

Colonoscopy

A common medical procedure where a specialist inserts a thin, flexible tube with a tiny light and camera on the end through the anus to examine the entire large bowel.

Why it matters:

It allows doctors to look for inflammation, check for conditions such as IBD, or safely spot and remove polyps before they have the chance to turn into cancer.



D

Diarrhoea

Passing loose, watery or more frequent poo. It can be short-term, likely due to a stomach bug or something you've eaten, or long-term, which may point to an underlying digestive condition.

A gutsy tip:

The NHS advises seeking medical advice if diarrhoea lasts for more than seven days, if you spot blood in your poo, or if you can't keep fluids down and suspect dehydration.

Distension

The physical, visible widening of the belly. It occurs due to a glitch in the reflexes of the diaphragm and abdominal wall muscles, causing the tummy to push outwards.

Did you know?

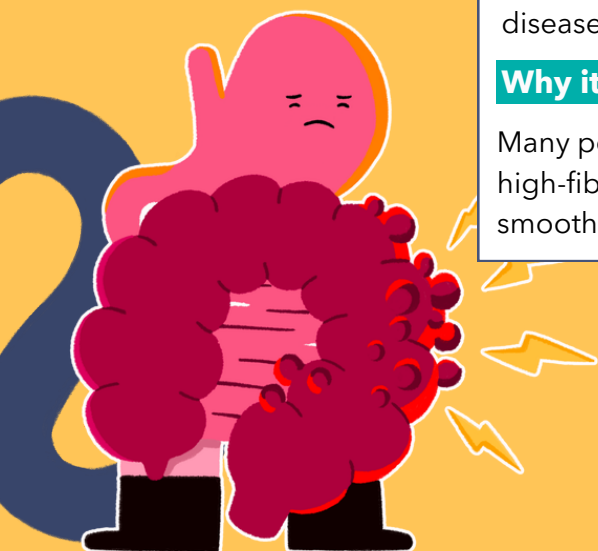
While bloating is the internal feeling of pressure, distension is the actual physical swelling. People can experience either, or both together.

Diverticular disease

A common condition where small, bulging pouches called diverticula develop in the wall of the large intestine. If these pouches cause symptoms like pain or cramping, this is known as diverticular disease. If they become infected or inflamed, this is diverticulitis.

Why it matters:

Many people have these pouches without ever knowing, but a high-fibre diet and staying active can help keep the bowel moving smoothly and reduce the risk of symptoms.



Dumping syndrome

A group of symptoms, such as nausea, cramping, palpitations, sweating, diarrhoea and dizziness, that can happen when food (especially sugars) moves too quickly from the stomach into the small intestine. It most commonly occurs after stomach or oesophageal surgery.

A gutsy tip:

Eating smaller and more regular meals and separating eating from drinking fluids can help ease how quickly food moves through the gut. Avoiding foods high in sugar can also help.



Eosinophilic disease

An umbrella term for chronic conditions (like Eosinophilic Oesophagitis) where a type of white blood cell called an eosinophil builds up in the lining of the digestive tract. This causes inflammation, swelling and difficulty swallowing with eosinophilic oesophagitis, for example.

Why it matters:

It's often triggered by an immune response to certain foods or environmental allergens and requires careful medical management to protect the tissue of the gut.

Faecal incontinence

An inability to control bowel movements, leading to the involuntary leaking of poo or gas. It is very common but underreported as people don't talk about it. It can stem from several causes, such as weakened pelvic floor muscles, nerve damage, severe constipation or childbirth injuries.

Why it matters:

Because of the taboo surrounding our poo, many people suffer in silence for years before asking for help. Shining a light on this condition helps people to realise they're not alone and that it's okay - and sometimes vital - to talk about it. Effective treatments are available.



G

Gallbladder

A small, pouch-like organ tucked just under your liver on the right side of your tummy. Its main job is to act as a storage reservoir for bile. When you eat a meal containing fats, the gallbladder contracts, releasing stored bile into the small intestine to help break them down.

Did you know?

While the gallbladder is incredibly helpful for digestion, you can live a normal, healthy life without one. If it needs to be surgically removed due to severe gallstones or inflammation, the liver produces bile as before. But instead of being stored, the bile drips continuously and directly into your digestive system instead.

Gallstones

Small, hard stones that form in the gallbladder, usually made of hardened cholesterol or digestive fluids. They are incredibly common, and while many people never notice them, they can cause intense pain if they get stuck in a bile duct.

Why it matters:

A gallstone "attack" causes severe pain under the right ribs or in the centre of the tummy that can radiate to the back. Knowing the symptoms helps people to seek medical help early before complications like infection develop.



Gastroparesis

A chronic (long-term) disorder where the stomach is unable to empty its contents in the usual way. It means "stomach paralysis" and it happens when the nerves that signal the stomach muscles to contract become damaged or ineffective. This causes food to pass through the digestive system too slowly, despite there being no physical blockage.

Did you know?

Gastroparesis is not a food intolerance, so strictly cutting out groups like wheat or dairy generally doesn't help and should never be done without medical supervision. While the most common known cause in adults is nerve damage from diabetes, for many people, the cause is "idiopathic", meaning it is completely unknown.

Gastroscopy

A procedure where a thin, flexible tube with a tiny light and camera on the end is passed down the throat into the oesophagus, stomach and first part of the small bowel.

Why it matters:

It is usually a quick, straightforward way for doctors to get a literal "inside look" at what might be causing digestive symptoms such as persistent indigestion, heartburn, or difficulty swallowing.



H

Heartburn

A burning discomfort or pain in the chest, right behind the breastbone, caused by stomach acid irritating the lining of the oesophagus. It is the most common symptom of acid reflux.

A gutsy tip:

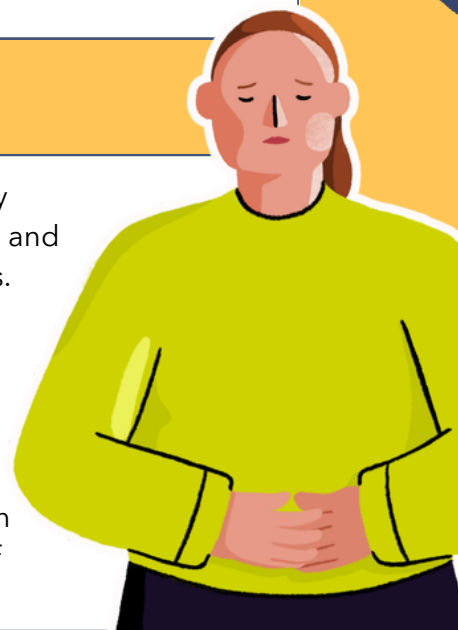
While a single heavy meal can trigger temporary heartburn, frequent bouts shouldn't be ignored, and you should speak to a doctor if heartburn persists.

Helicobacter Pylori (H.Pylori)

A common type of bacteria that infects the stomach lining. It is uniquely adapted to survive the harsh, highly acidic environment of the stomach and can live in the body for decades without causing any obvious problems.

Why it matters:

While many people never experience symptoms, H.Pylori is a leading cause of persistent indigestion (dyspepsia) and stomach ulcers. This happens because H.Pylori slowly inflames and weakens the stomach's protective mucus lining. The good news is it can be easily detected with a simple breath or poo test and is usually cleared with a short course of antibiotics. Your doctor should check it has gone after treatment.



Hiatus hernia

A condition where the very top part of the stomach slides upwards through a natural gap in the diaphragm and into the chest cavity. The diaphragm is the breathing muscle separating your chest from your tummy.

Did you know?

Many people have a small hiatus hernia without realising it. However, because it alters the anatomy at the bottom of the oesophagus, it is a very common culprit behind persistent acid reflux and heartburn.

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)

An umbrella term used mainly for chronic conditions that cause long-term, painful inflammation and ulcers within the digestive tract. While it most commonly refers to Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, it also includes microscopic colitis. Microscopic colitis is a type of inflammation that causes severe watery diarrhoea. It can only be detected when tissue samples (biopsies) are looked at under a microscope.

Why it matters:

Because of the taboo surrounding our poo, many people suffer in silence for years before asking for help. Shining a light on this condition helps people to realise they're not alone and that it's okay – and sometimes vital – to talk about it. Effective treatments are available.

I

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

A very common functional gut condition affecting the way the brain and the gut communicate. It leads to symptoms such as pain, bloating, diarrhoea, or constipation, but it doesn't cause physical damage to the gut.

Did you know?

Because IBS varies widely from person to person, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' treatment. Treatment focuses on what symptoms are present. Treatment varies from diet, probiotics, medicines, gut-directed hypnotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.



Jaundice

A condition that causes a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes. It happens when there is a buildup of a yellowish substance called bilirubin in the body, which is usually processed by a healthy liver and excreted in bile.

Why it matters:

Jaundice is a visible warning sign that something is interrupting the normal workflow of the liver, gallbladder or pancreas, such as a blocked bile duct or liver inflammation. If noticed, it always requires prompt medical assessment.

J

K (Vitamin)

Vitamin K is a vital nutrient for blood clotting and bone health. A healthy gut microbiome produces necessary Vitamin K. Individuals with some digestive conditions may face deficiency and related symptoms such as easy bruising, poor wound healing, weak bones (osteoporosis) and an increased risk of bleeding. Certain medications used to treat digestive conditions can interfere with how your body also absorbs Vitamin K. If you are worried, it's important to talk to your doctor.

A gutsy tip:

To keep your vitamin K-producing bacteria thriving, make sure you have a diverse diet, rich in prebiotic fibres like leeks, onions, garlic and oats. Pair this with dietary sources of Vitamin K such as spinach, kale and broccoli. Small amounts of vitamin K are found in meat and dairy foods. Cook with a splash of a healthy fat (like olive oil), to maximise absorption.

K



L

Lactose intolerance

Where the body is unable to fully break down lactose, a type of sugar mainly found in milk and some dairy products. It happens when the small intestine doesn't produce enough of an enzyme called lactase.

Did you know?

Lactose intolerance is not a milk allergy. While an allergy involves the immune system and can cause life threatening reactions, intolerance is a problem of the digestive system not producing enough lactase enzyme. When consumed, lactose can cause uncomfortable gas, bloating and cramps.

Liver

The heavy-lifting chemical factory of your body, positioned just under your right ribs. It performs hundreds of essential jobs including filtering toxins from your blood, processing nutrients from your food and producing bile to help digest fats.

Why it matters:

The liver is incredibly resilient and can often repair itself from minor damage, meaning liver disease rarely causes symptoms in its early stages. Taking care of it through a balanced diet and watching your alcohol intake is vital for your digestive health.



M

Microbiome (Gut)

The vast, bustling community of trillions of bacteria, fungi and viruses living inside your large intestine. These microbes are essential for fermenting food, supporting your immune system and even influencing your mood.

A gutsy tip:

The best way to feed a healthy, diverse microbiome isn't by eating a heavily restricted diet, but by eating a wide variety of plant foods. Aiming for as many varieties of plant foods as possible, including vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, grains and legumes, is a great goal.

Motility

A medical term for the coordinated, rhythmic muscle contractions that move food, liquid and waste through your digestive system. This process is called peristalsis.

Why it matters:

When gut motility is too fast, it can cause diarrhoea and poor nutrient absorption. When it is too slow, it leads to constipation or conditions like gastroparesis. Understanding that the gut has many vital jobs is key to getting to grips with guts.



Mouth

The starting point of the entire digestive system. Here, food is broken down mechanically, by chewing, and chemically, by your saliva.

Did you know?

Digestion begins before food even touches your lips! Just seeing, smelling or thinking about a meal triggers your brain to send signals to your mouth and stomach to start pumping out digestive juices and enzymes, preparing the runway for your food.



N

Nausea

Another word for feeling sick. A wave of unease or discomfort in the stomach that often creates an urge to forcefully bring your stomach contents up (vomit). It is an incredibly common symptom that can be triggered by anything such as a stomach bug or food sensitivity, to delayed stomach emptying or stress.

A gutsy tip:

If you are experiencing mild nausea, sipping on ginger tea or trying peppermint oil capsules can help naturally relax the smooth muscles of the digestive tract and settle your tummy.

Oesophagus (food pipe)

The muscular tube that connects your mouth to your stomach. When you swallow, the muscles in the wall of the oesophagus contract in a wave-like motion to actively push food down into the stomach.

Did you know?

Gravity helps, but it isn't needed to get your food to your stomach. The muscular contractions of the oesophagus are so strong that you could technically swallow food while hanging upside down, although we don't recommend trying this!

O



P

Pancreas

A long, flat gland nestled behind your stomach. It plays a dual starring role in your health: it acts as a digestive factory, pumping out powerful enzymes to break down your food, and a chemical regulator, releasing hormones like insulin directly into your blood to control your blood sugar levels.

Why it matters:

Because the pancreas sits deep within the abdomen, conditions affecting it can be tricky to diagnose early. Keeping your pancreas healthy means keeping an eye on alcohol intake, avoiding smoking, and treating persistent, severe upper tummy pain that radiates to your back with the seriousness it deserves and talking to a doctor. It could indicate a serious condition called pancreatitis.

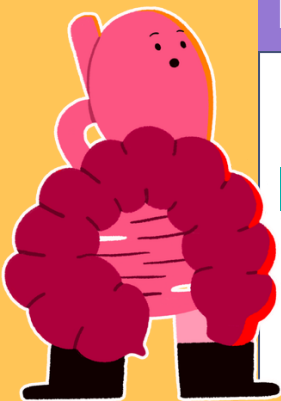


Pancreatic exocrine insufficiency (PEI)

A condition where the pancreas doesn't produce enough digestive enzymes. Without these enzymes, your body cannot properly break down nutrients from your food, especially fats.

Why it matters:

PEI can lead to malnutrition, weight loss, and a very specific type of poo that is pale, greasy, smelly and difficult to flush (called steatorrhoea). It can be managed with prescription enzyme capsules taken with food, completely transforming a person's life.



Polyps (of the bowel)

Small, fleshy growths that form on the inner lining of the large bowel. They are very common and usually do not cause any symptoms at all.

Why it matters:

While most polyps are completely harmless, some can slowly turn into bowel cancer over many years if left untreated. This is why removing them safely during a routine colonoscopy is one of the most effective ways to prevent cancer before it starts.

Quality of life

In digestive health, quality of life refers to how your physical digestive symptoms impact your wellbeing, mental health, energy levels and social freedom. It is the difference between managing a condition and thriving, ensuring that your body's internal health supports your ability to live comfortably, confidently and without constant worry.

Why it matters:

Quality of life is very important when it comes to digestive health. Living with a digestive condition is about so much more than physical symptoms like pain or bloating. Your digestive health directly shapes how you experience the world every day.

Q

R

Rectum

The final, six-inch muscular chamber at the very end of the large intestine (colon). Its primary job is to act as a temporary storage facility for waste material (your poo) until your body is ready to eliminate it.

Did you know?

The rectum is packed with highly sensitive sensors that tell the brain whether the contents waiting to be passed are gas, liquid, or poo. This incredible brain-gut coordination allows you to make the conscious decision to hold it in or find a toilet!

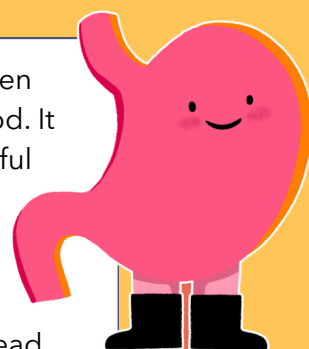
S

Stomach

A muscular, J-shaped organ located in the upper abdomen that acts as a temporary blender and holding tank for food. It breaks down what you eat using a combination of powerful muscular contractions and highly acidic digestive juices.

Why it matters:

The stomach doesn't actually do most of your nutrient absorption. That happens later in the small intestine. Instead, its main job is to sterilise food with acid and churn it into a thick liquid called chyme. To keep it from digesting itself, the stomach relies on a heavy, continuous coating of protective mucus. If this barrier fails, the stomach's own acid can quickly irritate or damage the tissue beneath.



Stomach ulcer (peptic ulcer)

A painful sore that develops on the protective inner lining of your stomach or the first part of the small intestine. They happen when the layer of mucus that protects the stomach from its own acid is reduced.

Why it matters:

Stomach ulcers are not caused by life stress or spicy food, though they can make the pain worse. The two main culprits are an infection caused by H.Pylori bacteria or the frequent use of anti-inflammatory painkillers like ibuprofen.

Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO)

A condition where there is an abnormal increase in the bacterial population in the small intestine, an area that normally has relatively low levels of bacteria compared to the large bowel.

A gutsy tip:

SIBO can cause intense bloating, gas and diarrhoea because the misplaced bacteria ferment food too early in the digestive process. It requires careful diagnosis by a specialist and is typically treated with targeted antibiotics.

T

Tenesmus

A distressing and painful feeling that you constantly need to go for a poo, even when your rectum is completely empty. It often involves straining, cramping and a sensation of not finishing your poo properly.

Did you know?

Tenesmus is an important symptom because it usually signals that the rectum is inflamed or irritated. It is a common sign of a flare-up (onset or increase of symptoms) in digestive conditions like ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease or IBS and should always be discussed with a doctor.

Ulcerative colitis

A chronic (long-term) type of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) that causes inflammation and ulcers specifically in the inner lining of the large intestine (colon) and rectum. The inflammation is continuous rather than patchy and tends to start at the rectum upwards.

Why it matters:

Ulcerative colitis is an autoimmune condition, meaning the body mistakenly attacks its own healthy tissue. This can lead to bloody diarrhoea, severe cramping and fatigue. It requires expert, specialist care, but with the right treatments, many people achieve long periods of symptom-free remission.

U

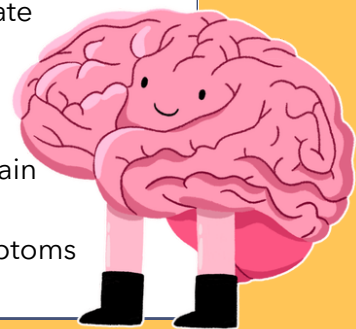
V

Vagus nerve

The longest and most complex of the cranial nerves, acting as a massive two-way system that connects your brain directly to your gut, known as the gut-brain connection. It constantly sends signals back and forth, regulating everything from your heart rate to your digestion.

Did you know?

The vagus nerve is the physical backbone of the gut-brain connection. It explains why emotional stress, anxiety or excitement can instantly trigger physical digestive symptoms like "butterflies", cramps or a sudden urge to poo.



Weight loss (unexplained)

Dropping weight unexpectedly without changing your diet or exercise routine. While many people try to lose weight intentionally, an unexpected and noticeable drop can be a key warning sign from your digestive system or other area of your body.

Why it matters:

Unexplained weight loss or gain could point to a more serious, underlying issue. This should always be discussed with a GP.

W

Wind

The medical term for gas in the digestive system, which either leaves the body through the mouth (burping/belching) or through the rectum (flatulence). It is a completely normal, daily byproduct of swallowing air and the natural fermentation of food by your gut bacteria.

A gutsy tip:

While passing wind is healthy, excessive or trapped wind can cause uncomfortable bloating and cramps. Simple lifestyle tweaks, like eating more slowly to avoid swallowing air and cutting down on fizzy drinks can make a huge difference in managing wind.



X-ray (barium or abdominal)

A quick, painless medical imaging test that uses a small amount of radiation to take pictures of the inside of your body. Doctors often use barium x-rays to clearly map out the outline of the oesophagus, stomach and small bowel. This is done by swallowing a chalky liquid in preparation before undergoing the test.

Why it matters:

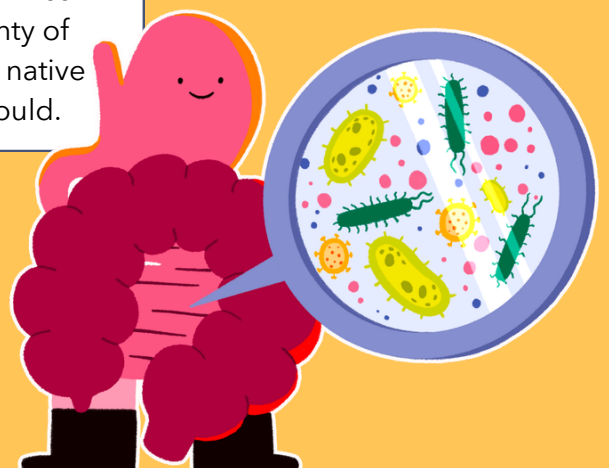
Barium acts like a temporary spotlight inside your digestive system. Because the liquid blocks x-rays, it shows up bright white on the scan, allowing doctors to easily spot structural problems such as narrowings, swallowing difficulties, hiatus hernias or ulcers that wouldn't normally show up on a standard, plain x-ray.

Yeast (gut mycobiome)

While gut bacteria often get all the spotlight, your digestive tract is also home to a native community of microscopic fungi and yeasts. This population is known scientifically as the mycobiome and it coexists naturally alongside your gut bacteria.

Did you know?

In a healthy gut, resident yeast live in perfect harmony with your immune system. While an overgrowth of yeast can sometimes cause issues, maintaining a diverse diet packed with plenty of dietary fibre ensures your beneficial bacteria keep these native yeasts perfectly balanced, functioning exactly as they should.



Z

Zinc

An essential mineral that plays a vital role in maintaining the digestive system's lining, supporting your immune system and helping your body repair damaged tissues.

Did you know?

For people experiencing severe, chronic diarrhoea or managing a flare-up of an inflammatory digestive condition, the body can lose zinc rapidly. Ensuring you get enough zinc through foods like seafood, seeds, nuts and whole grains is a practical step some people might take alongside any medical treatment to help support the healing of the gut wall when there is active inflammation, for example, in IBD. If you suspect low zinc levels, talk to your doctor or dietitian.

Together,

we're getting to

grips with guts.

Please note, our Gutsy Glossary is intended to provide general information about the digestive system and common medical terms. It is not intended to provide guidance for people living with a digestive condition. If you have a diagnosed digestive condition and need tailored information relating to your condition, please speak to your healthcare team.



Need more information on your digestive condition or symptoms?

For information and guidance, go to gutscharity.org.uk/information or contact our Helpline on **0300 102 4887** or go to gutscharity.org.uk/helpline. We're here if you need us.

