

Let's Talk...

Indigestion



What is indigestion and what causes it?

Indigestion (sometimes called dyspepsia) is a general term used to describe a collection of uncomfortable symptoms that occur in your upper belly (abdomen). It is incredibly common, affecting up to 1 or 2 in 5 people at any given time.

Indigestion is something almost all of us will get now and then. It often happens after we eat or drink too much, if we rush our food, or after a heavy, spicy or fatty meal. It can also be triggered by stress, anxiety of certain medications that can irritate the stomach lining. Tobacco and alcohol are also common causes.

When you get indigestion, it can leave you feeling generally uncomfortable, heavy or sluggish. With taboo still surrounding our guts, you may feel hesitate to talk about it, but we're here to flush away the stigma. Why? Because whilst a bout of indigestion is usually harmless, understanding your guts makes it easier to manage your symptoms and recognise when your guts might be trying to tell you something more serious may be happening.

What are the symptoms of indigestion?

Indigestion feels different for everyone, but it typically includes one or a combination of the following symptoms in the upper tummy:

- A mild discomfort or severe pain which can sometimes be just below the lower end of your breastbone.
- An uncomfortable feeling of heaviness or general fullness after eating regular-sized meals.
- Feeling full too quickly when eating a meal, even if you haven't eaten much.
- Feeling sick (nausea) or retching.
- Belching (burping) or bringing up bitter-tasting fluids or food into your mouth (regurgitation).

Note:

Indigestion symptoms shouldn't be confused with heartburn. While they can happen at the same time, heartburn is specifically a painful, burning sensation that rises behind your breastbone, linked to acid reflux. Please see our Let's Talk... Heartburn and Reflux resource on the Let's Talk Guts resource hub or go to gutscharity.org.uk/info/heartburn-reflux for more information.

How should I treat

indigestion?

If you're experiencing short-term indigestion, it can usually be controlled and managed at home with simple, practical adjustments to your eating routine and lifestyle.

Slow down your mealtimes

Avoid rushing your food. Take the time to relax, sit up straight and chew each mouthful thoroughly before swallowing.

Tweak your diet

Try eating smaller, more regular meals rather than large, heavy portions that stretch and overload your gut. Keep a food diary to track your triggers. Many people also find it useful to cut back on caffeine, alcohol, rich, fatty or spicy foods, tomatoes and fizzy drinks.

The time you eat

If your symptoms tend to act up when you lie down at night, try to avoid eating anything for at least three hours before bedtime.

Medicine

Over-the-counter treatments are readily available from pharmacies without a prescription. Options include antacid liquids or tablets to neutralise your stomach acid, or medicines called proton pump inhibitors that reduce the amount of acid your stomach produces. Your pharmacist can recommend what may best suit you.



How can I avoid

indigestion?

One of the best ways to keep indigestion at bay in the long run is by adopting gut-friendly habits in your day-to-day life:

- Maintain a healthy, balanced diet and where possible, keep physically active to support your gut's natural rhythm and movements.
- Keep within the recommended guidelines for alcohol intake (visit gutscharity.org.uk/info/alcohol for more information).
- Don't smoke tobacco. Smoking can significantly worsen indigestion symptoms during or after a meal.
- Manage stress levels where possible. Your brain and gut are in constant communication, and stress can make the nerves in your stomach much more sensitive.

When should I seek medical advice?

For most people, indigestion passes without a hitch. However, if your symptoms keep coming back, don't improve with lifestyle changes, or if you are 55 years old or older experiencing new symptoms, you should consult your doctor. They can check for underlying causes, test you for a common stomach bacteria called H.Pylori, or see if you need a routine endoscopy to look at the upper part of your digestive system.

You should also seek medical advice from your doctor or NHS 111 if indigestion is accompanied by any of the following:

- Pain or difficulty when swallowing, or a sensation that food is getting stuck in your gullet.
- Unintentional or unexplained weight loss.
- Frequently or persistently being sick (vomiting).
- Feeling an unusual lump in your upper tummy.
- New, unexplained fatigue, general loss of energy or shortness of breath (which can be a sign of low iron levels or anaemia).
- Severe upper tummy pain that travels straight through to your back.

It's always a good idea to get persistent changes checked out by your GP.

Seek medical advice **without delay** if you experience a sudden, severe onset of tummy pain, a high fever, a fast heartbeat or if you are vomiting blood or passing black, tarry poo.

How do I tell someone I have

indigestion?

Telling your doctor

Your doctor is used to listening to people talk about their digestive symptoms, so be completely open with them. Tell them exactly what the discomfort feels like, when and how often it happens, if it's related to specific foods, and whether any over-the-counter remedies have helped. It's important to tell your doctor about the impact your symptoms are having on your daily life, so they can provide the right treatment and care.

Telling your employer

You might want to tell your employer if persistent upper tummy pain or nausea is affecting your focus or making it hard to sit comfortably at work. Letting them know you are dealing with digestive symptoms can help them support you. This could look like ensuring you have time for a calm, unhurried lunch break, or giving you flexibility to step away if you feel sick.

Telling your family and friends

If you're experiencing indigestion, whatever the reason, you can tell people about it. It's likely they'll have experienced it themselves before but if it's having an impact on your life, tell them how they can support you. It's okay to be clear about what you need and anyone who cares about you will meet you with kindness and reassurance.

How do I know what's normal for me?

Paying attention to how your tummy feels after eating, as well as checking your poo regularly, are essential steps to getting to know your normal. It can also help you to spot when something changes or when you might need to seek help.

For more information about indigestion, including causes, diagnosis, treatment and support, go to gutscharity.org.uk/symptoms/indigestion.

Our online Poo-Torial tool can help you to better understand your digestive health by looking at the colour, consistency and frequency of your poo. Go to gutscharity.org.uk/poo-torial to try it now.



Guts UK is the national charity for the digestive system. We provide information and support on more than 40 digestive conditions and symptoms, as well as health and lifestyle. Go to gutscharity.org.uk/information to find out more. Need support? Contact our Helpline on 0300 102 4887 or gutscharity.org.uk/helpline.

Please note, this information is intended for people without a diagnosed digestive condition. If you live with a digestive condition and need information and support for indigestion, please speak to your healthcare team.

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