

vegetables and fruit each day, and eat less fat. Quit smoking too - it can contribute to digestive problems, including ulcers.



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## Help for common digestive problems

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DEPARTMENT

## Help for common digestive problems

Your digestive system is like a factory that turns everything you eat into fuel to keep your body working - but when things go wrong with it, the result can be some uncomfortable symptoms.

### **Burning chest pain - is it heartburn peptic ulcer or a heart attack?**

A burning pain (heartburn) just behind the breastbone is usually a symptom of what doctors call 'acid reflux'. This is when digestive juices (which contain acid) spill out of your stomach into other parts of your digestive system and cause a "burning" feeling. (Pain caused by a heart attack, on the other hand, can be more like a squeezing sensation in the chest, and may be accompanied by shortness of breath, sweating, and a sick feeling in the stomach. These symptoms mean you need to call an ambulance straight away)

Acid reflux can be caused by some foods and drinks, including fatty foods, coffee and alcohol, or by eating a lot of food late at night. We all get acid reflux sometimes, but if it happens a lot, see your doctor - it may be a symptom of a stomach ulcer. These ulcers, which affect around 230,000 people in Australia, used to be blamed on stress, alcohol and fatty food. Although these things can make ulcers worse, the real cause is usually a germ called *H. pylori*. Doctors now recommend that anyone with symptoms of stomach ulcer should have a test to detect this bacteria. The problem can be treated by taking special antibiotics.

Having *H. pylori* is very common in Australia and the risk is high among people from Italy, Middle Eastern countries and Asia. *H. pylori* can also increase the risk of stomach cancer -

anyone with a family history of stomach cancer should also ask their doctor about having a test.

### **Feeling bloated? It could be irritable bowel syndrome.**

Almost one in seven people have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which is more common in women. Symptoms can include bloating and abdominal pain, as well as diarrhoea or constipation. These symptoms come and go, with attacks lasting for days or weeks. Doctors don't really know what causes IBS, but sometimes it can be triggered by stress or a gastric infection. Food can be a factor too, but different foods affect different people. For some people, IBS can be improved by eating fibre-rich foods, for example. IBS isn't serious, but it can be distressing. A doctor can give advice on how to cope with the symptoms.

But sometimes symptoms like abdominal pain and changes in bowel movements can be a sign of more serious problems. See a doctor promptly if you have other symptoms such as blood in the bowel motions, or weight loss, or if you're over 40 and your symptoms have come on suddenly, or if you have a family history of bowel cancer.

**Constipation - you don't have to put up with it.** Some people think that the best treatment for constipation is taking laxatives. Laxatives are okay occasionally, but using them too frequently can make the problem worse. The best treatment is to eat more fibre rich foods every day. These foods include wholegrain bread, vegetables, fruits, and dried peas and beans. It's also important to drink plenty of water and exercise regularly. If you're still constipated, try a laxative - but see a doctor if the problem persists.

**Tips for a healthy digestive system.** Enjoy a diet which includes plenty of cereals and grains, and a variety of