TOYOURHEALTH
WELCOA'S ONLINE GENERAL WELLNESS BULLETIN

HAVING A NOT-SO-GREAT GUT FEELING?

A Look at Digestive Disorders

We all experience an occasional tummy ache or gastrointestinal discomfort from time to time. But for some people, digestive issues are a daily occurrence. Indeed, digestive system diseases and disorders are very common. Around 60 to 70 million people in the U.S. live with a digestive disease.

It's important not to ignore symptoms in your gut. Many digestive disorders are easiest to treat when they first develop. One of the most serious gut disorders is inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), although it's not very common. This isn't to be confused with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). IBS is a very common disorder that's characterized by abdominal pain, bloating, and changes in bowel habits.

IBD occurs when immune system cells in the gut overreact to a perceived threat to your body. Often, that "threat" is the normal bugs that make up the microbiome—the microscopic creatures like bacteria, fungi, and viruses—that live in your gut. This overreaction can damage the digestive (gastrointestinal or GI) tract.

The two main types of IBD are ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. These two diseases also differ in how deeply they can damage tissue. Ulcerative colitis causes damage in the gut lining. Crohn's disease can go all the way through the gut. Severe cases of Crohn's can lead to narrowing of the intestines and even holes in the gut.



Other conditions can harm the lining of the stomach and lead to a type of inflammation called gastritis. The most common cause of gastritis is infection with bacteria called Helicobacter pylori. Other causes include the long-term use of some pain medications. If left untreated, gastritis can lead to painful ulcers. Other things that can cause pain and discomfort in the GI tract are acid reflux or food sensitivities.

DIAGNOSING DIGESTIVE DISORDERS

It can be tricky to diagnose a digestive disease because they share a lot of symptoms. Symptoms of many gut conditions include pain, gassiness, bloating, and diarrhea.

For IBD, there are several red-flag symptoms, which include blood in the stool, weight loss, and signs of inflammation found in a blood test. A sign of IBD in children is failure to grow.

IBS can give some people diarrhea and others constipation. Some people go back and forth between the two. Gastritis and food sensitivities can also cause long-term gut discomfort. To figure out what's causing gut troubles, doctors may need to run a variety of tests. These can include blood tests and a stool test to look for infection.

Some people may have an imaging test, such as a CT scan. Others may need to have an endoscopy. Endoscopy uses a long, flexible tube with a tiny camera on the end to look in the intestines or stomach.



TREATMENT

While symptoms for different gut disorders can be similar, treatments vary widely. For gastritis caused by bacterial infection, antibiotics are used to kill the germs. If medications are causing gastritis, switching to a different kind of drug will usually allow the stomach to heal.

Food sensitivities can be managed by changing your diet. A nutritionist can help you figure out what foods might be irritating your gut. Acid reflux can also often be improved by changes in your diet and medication.

Treatment isn't one-size-fits-all for IBS. And while stress doesn't cause IBS, it can trigger flare-ups of symptoms in many people. Stress reduction strategies and cognitive behavior therapy—a type of talk therapy—can help some people manage symptoms of IBS.

IBD is harder to treat than most gut disorders. Treatments focus on stopping inflammation long enough to allow the gut tissue to heal. Some medications used for IBD control inflammation. Other newer drugs suppress the immune system. But these newer drugs can have serious side effects and are usually only used when others don't work.

For now, talk with your doctor if gut discomfort or pain are impacting your quality of life. Available treatments can help most people get their insides back in order again.