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INFORMATION ABOUT

# LOOKING AFTER YOUR INSIDES

WHAT WHY  
WILL HOW OR  
IF WHEN

IN ASSOCIATION WITH:

**core**  
FIGHTING GUT AND LIVER DISEASE

**bsg**  
BRITISH SOCIETY OF  
GASTROENTEROLOGY

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# LOOKING AFTER YOUR INSIDES

**Our insides have the most remarkable ability to cope with a huge range of food and drink over the course of our lifetimes.**

**We are, quite literally, what we eat.**

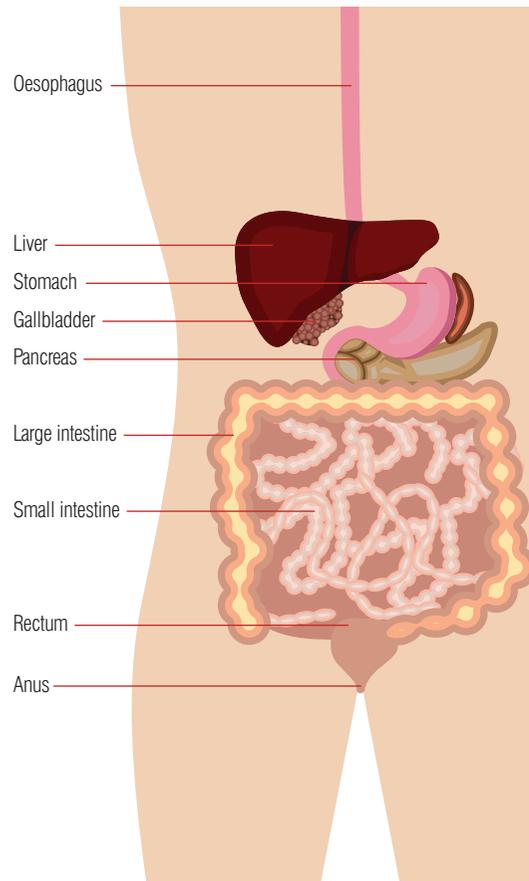
And, although we may all start life with just milk on the menu, it is astonishing to think of the variety of what passes our lips thereafter as we grow into adult life. However, eating and drinking 'unwisely' over long periods may lead to trouble. Although some of us may claim to possess 'cast iron guts', many individuals need to be much more careful in their choice of what to eat and drink. So, the advice that follows is trying to help you find ways of giving your guts the best chance of coping. If you occasionally stray outside the guidelines we suggest, it's very unlikely to cause you much harm. So, whilst you might come to regret choosing to eat that tempting but particularly spicy curry, it is unlikely to give you anything more than a short-lived heartburn or stomach upset. But if you regularly eat or drink unwisely, you might be building up longer-term troubles for yourself.

## WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO EAT?

It is never too early or late in life to learn good eating habits and to follow a well balanced diet.

- Eating infrequent large meals is more likely to cause symptoms of heartburn and altered bowel function than consuming smaller meals more regularly. Starchy snacks (biscuits, cakes, doughnuts, crisps) between meals are especially likely to cause symptoms.

- Large, rich meals late at night should be avoided if possible, especially by older people. A cooked meal is more easily digested in the middle of the day.
- Keeping hydrated is important for a healthy lifestyle, and can help the gut. Most of the fluid we need to keep the intestinal system functioning is in the food we eat so we don't need to drink a vast amount to stay hydrated. For most of us in most situations a couple of pints of liquid a day will suffice.



## IS IT EASY TO MAKE MY DIET BETTER?

For most people, healthier eating is simply a matter of adjusting the balance of what they already eat. Increasing the intake of fibre and reducing the amount of sweet or fatty foods is the best way to ensure your insides work well. It's also a good way to keep your weight down.

### Here are a few tips for a well balanced diet:

- Eat more fibre in the form of fruit and vegetables and make it part of your daily diet. To optimise bowel function the average woman needs about 25 grams of fibre a day, and a man needs about 35 grams of fibre a day; for example, an apple and banana contain about 4 and 3 grams of fibre respectively.
- Cut down fat. Eat more lean meat and fish, drink skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, and grill rather than fry foods. Certain forms of fat are especially troublesome, so when possible use sunflower, soya or corn oil for cooking and choose non-dairy spreads instead of butter.
- Cut down on your intake of sugar and salt. Try not to add sugar to drinks and cereals. Sweeteners can be used as a substitute (but remember that sorbitol, which is often used as a sweetener in drinks and food, can cause diarrhoea in some people). Choose low-calorie drinks and unsweetened fruit juice. Instead of cakes, biscuits, sweets and chocolate, try fresh fruit or unsalted snacks. Limit salt in cooking, where possible (about ½ teaspoon/large saucepan).
- Drinking too much coffee and tea causes stomach upsets in some people. It is best to limit yourself to no more than four cups a day.

## IS IT ALL RIGHT TO EAT SPICY FOOD?

For most people, spices are not harmful. In fact, they are enjoyable because they add flavour and zest – especially to Indian, Thai or Chinese food. But, some people do find their intestines are temporarily quite upset when they have foods such as these which are different from their day-to-day meals. If you find that spicy foods give you heartburn, stomach pain or diarrhoea, it is sensible to go easy on them in future, or at least anticipate trouble if you do indulge.

## SHOULD I TAKE EXTRA VITAMINS?

A healthy balanced diet contains all the vitamins you need. Doctors are sure that taking supplements of extra vitamins have no value to your health for the overwhelming majority of us in the Western world. Do not be misled by advertisements about vitamin supplements that suggest that you will, in some way or another, feel better for taking these products; it is better to consume these minerals and vitamins in food rather than tablet form.

## IS A VEGETARIAN DIET SAFE?

A balanced vegetarian diet can be very healthy, particularly if adequate amounts of food such as cheese and eggs are included, to provide the necessary protein. However, some extreme diets can be unhealthy, and if you choose to follow a strict diet which excludes all animal products, it may be advisable to take vitamin supplements to avoid vitamin deficiencies.

## WHAT ELSE HELPS MY INSIDES?

Keeping our insides in good working order means treating them well. The stomach, bowels and liver can all be affected by smoking and alcohol, lack of physical activity and a stressful lifestyle.

## IS ALCOHOL HARMFUL?

Alcohol can lead to a number of digestive disorders, particularly affecting the stomach, liver and pancreas. Most of these damaging effects can be avoided by keeping drinking to moderate levels. Keep a close eye on your alcohol units. One unit equals one half pint of beer, a 125ml glass of wine, or one pub measure of spirits. Don't drink more than 21 units of alcohol a week if you are a man, and no more than 14 units are recommended as the safe limit for women. There is growing evidence that alcohol should be avoided altogether during pregnancy.

## SMOKING IS DANGEROUS BUT WILL IT HARM MY INSIDES?

As well as being the leading cause of early death from such conditions as lung cancer and heart disease, cigarette smoking makes you more likely to have stomach and duodenal ulcers and heartburn and is also an important risk factor for stomach and bowel cancers.

## HOW CAN I AVOID TUMMY BUGS?

Food poisoning is usually a short-lived illness but it can be very unpleasant while it lasts. Although it may be unavoidable, especially in warm countries abroad (see below), you can lessen your chances of getting it. Poor hygiene can certainly increase your chance of getting food poisoning and gastro-enteritis (an infection in the bowel). Always wash your hands after visiting the toilet and before handling food. If you do get a tummy bug, make sure to keep your liquid intake up.

## EATING HABITS

Care should be taken with storage of food, particularly in hot weather. Bugs that can upset your insides can grow even on chilled or frozen food if it is not kept as cold as it should be. Certain foods, especially meat, must be kept covered and well refrigerated (ideally at around four degrees centigrade).

Food manufacturers specify 'sell by' and 'eat before' dates. While some of these are used to specify when the food will be at its best, it can be risky to eat meat after the stated date.

When re-heating food, make sure it gets hot all the way through (e.g. into the middle of a pie, or down to the bone in a chicken leg) to kill all bacteria: if it's cold or bloody, don't eat it. This is particularly important when using a microwave oven or a barbecue.

## WHAT SHOULD I DO ON HOLIDAYS?

Most people are aware of how miserable it can be for a hard-earned holiday to be spoiled by a bad stomach upset. This usually results from a bacterial infection from contaminated food or water, but may also be caused by nerves, a change of diet or too much alcohol.

- In some foreign countries, where hygiene may be poor, drink only boiled or bottled water.
- Don't add ice to drinks.
- Choose food with care, avoiding unpeeled fruit, salads, shellfish and ice cream.
- Have a good time but be aware of the risk you run if you choose to eat food that has not been thoroughly cooked.

## WHY DO I SEEM TO GET STOMACH UPSETS AFTER CERTAIN FOODS?

A small number of people are allergic to certain foods, such as shellfish or milk products, and eating these foods may result in diarrhoea, palpitations of the heart or a skin rash. This is not especially common but many other people may have what is called a food intolerance: they find that their insides react to particular foods (wheat or dairy products, certain meats, vegetables, eggs or chocolate for example), causing pain, diarrhoea or vomiting. As with almost any symptom that just does not go away, it is usually a good idea to consult your GP. Seeing your GP about stomach upsets is probably more urgent if you experience them for the first time at, or over, the age of 45-50. Sometime, it is the context of when that food is eaten that provokes symptoms. If it turns out that you do have a food intolerance, once the problem is identified, it is often possible to keep well simply by being extra careful to avoid the offending item.

## STRESS AT WORK SEEMS TO UPSET MY STOMACH.

Stress is a healthy response of the body in its attempt to limit any uncontrollable demands made on you. Stress may, however, lead to anxiety, which can cause indigestion, abdominal pains and diarrhoea, and may aggravate the symptoms of ulcers and existing bowel disease. Recognising that this is the case can be very helpful in enabling you to cope.

- Avoiding feelings of anxiety, frustration and anger by learning how to tackle problems effectively will help reduce stress.
- Stress-relieving techniques can be learned. There are many different ways in which stress can be relieved. Some methods may appeal to you more than others.
- Many self-help books are available, and a particular approach may suit certain people.
- Yoga enthusiasts feel this can be an incredibly successful stress-buster.
- Everyone potentially benefits from regular breaks and holidays away from their daily routine.
- Don't make a habit of eating at your desk. Thirty to forty-five minutes out of the work-place environment allows you to relax, and avoids the temptation to rush your lunch.

## DOES EXERCISE HELP?

Regular exercise is good for the heart and circulation, but it can also maintain good digestion. Visiting a gym twice a week for planned exercise is useful – but may not appeal to all. Probably a brisk walk for a couple of miles or so, every day or two, can be just as good.

## CAN TABLETS OR MEDICINES HARM MY STOMACH?

Certain drugs or tablets can give rise to side-effects which may upset your insides and may cause indigestion, diarrhoea or constipation. Be cautious with medicines containing aspirin or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Nurofen).

These drugs that are used to treat pain and arthritis should be avoided if you have an ulcer or are prone to indigestion. Many are available over-the-counter to treat pain, so it is important to look carefully at the label. Paracetamol is a useful alternative to them. You should consult your doctor if you rely on these drugs and also suffer from indigestion or ulcers.

In addition, certain tranquillisers, painkillers and cough medicines can cause constipation, and some people may experience diarrhoea while taking antibiotics, iron tablets or blood pressure pills. The contraceptive pill may not be properly absorbed during an attack of diarrhoea or vomiting, and other methods of contraception should be used.

## DOES PREGNANCY AFFECT THE STOMACH?

Morning sickness is a common and unpleasant side effect of pregnancy, especially in the early stages. The reasons for it are not clear – possibly hormone or nerve-related. Late in pregnancy some women may find they are constipated as their growing baby leads to pressure on the pelvic floor. Heartburn is also quite common at this time. There are treatments available, but always ask your GP about which medicines are safe to take during pregnancy.

## WHEN SHOULD I SEE A GP ABOUT STOMACH TROUBLE?

All of us have short-lived upsets in the stomach from time to time. For the most part this settles down by itself and should give no cause for concern.

### BUT YOU SHOULD SEE YOUR GP ABOUT:

- A sudden but persistent change in the pattern of how your bowels work
- Bleeding from the back passage
- Increasing heartburn, indigestion or the stomach pain
- Losing weight unexpectedly
- Persistent vomiting
- Difficulty swallowing

All these are especially true if you have a family history of significant gut illness.

### WHAT RESEARCH IS NEEDED?

- Can we find methods – such as vaccines – to prevent food poisoning and travellers' diarrhoea?
- Are there safe drugs or antibiotics to treat travellers' diarrhoea?
- Are there ways to control the gut to maximise the benefits and minimise the harm done by various diets?
- Can we safely use hormonal methods to control satiety (feeling of fullness) to reduce excess weight?
- Why do some people gain weight more easily than others?
- Can we find reliable and easier ways to test for food allergy?
- What items of diet are related to diseases such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease?
- What role do food preservatives play in causing stomach cancer?
- Are there life-style or dietary factors (apart from smoking and alcohol) causing reflux, diverticular disease, gall-stones and other disorders?

# YOU CAN HELP COMBAT GUT AND LIVER DISEASE BY MAKING A DONATION.

Conditions that affect the gut, the liver and the pancreas (collectively known as digestive diseases) are widespread but little known. They can cause significant health problems for people who live with them and, sadly, they are a factor in 1 in 8 UK deaths. Core is the only national charity working to change this by fighting all digestive diseases. As a charity, Core:

- Supports important medical research that looks for cures and for ways of improving the lives of patients;
- Provides evidence-based information that enables patients and families to understand and control their condition;
- Works to raise awareness of these conditions, their symptoms and impact.

This booklet is sponsored by:

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This leaflet was published by Core in 2014 and will be reviewed during 2016. If you are reading this after 2016 some of the information may be out of date. This leaflet was written under the direction of our Medical Director and has been subject to both lay and professional review.

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Please contact us if you believe any information in this leaflet is in error.

### THERE ARE MANY WAYS YOU CAN SUPPORT OUR WORK NOW:

- Call us on **020 7486 0341**
- Text **CORE14** plus your donation amount to **70070**
- Complete the form overleaf and return it to us
- Donate via our website at **[www.corecharity.org.uk](http://www.corecharity.org.uk)**

You can find more information about digestive diseases and about Core's work by visiting our website at **[www.corecharity.org.uk](http://www.corecharity.org.uk)** or by calling **020 7486 0341** during office hours.

**This information booklet is produced by Core, the only national charity fighting all digestive diseases. Show your support for Core by making a donation today or by joining us as a Core Friend.**

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