

digestive  
health



Answers  
at *Walgreens*®



## Answers about digestive health begin here.

Digestion begins when you start chewing your food. It continues in the digestive tract, which is a connected chain of hollow organs in the body, including the mouth, esophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, or colon, rectum and anus.<sup>1,2</sup>

The digestive tract takes vitamins and minerals from food we eat.<sup>1,2</sup>

When it's not working well, we may experience digestive problems and the body may not be able to absorb the right amount of vitamins.<sup>1,2</sup> This booklet guides you through common digestive health problems and ways to help maintain digestive tract health.



**Contents**

Fiber .....Page 4

Probiotics .....Page 6

Heartburn .....Page 8

Gas .....Page 12

Constipation .....Page 14

Diarrhea .....Page 17

Hemorrhoids .....Page 20



## What is fiber?

Fiber is from plant-based foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains. It is important because it helps the body move waste through the digestive tract—the small and large intestines (colon). Many kinds of over-the-counter (OTC) supplements have fiber, including powders, wafers, capsules, gummies and chewable tablets.<sup>3</sup>





## How does fiber help with digestive health?

Fiber comes in two forms:

- **Insoluble fiber** increases stool size or bulk, which helps move food or waste and makes having a bowel movement easier.
- **Soluble fiber** lowers cholesterol and glucose levels.

High fiber foods make you feel fuller faster, which can help in maintaining or losing weight.<sup>3</sup>





## What are probiotics?

Probiotics are “good bacteria” in your digestive tract that limit the growth of bad bacteria which can cause digestive upset. You can get probiotics by eating certain foods and taking supplements, that help restock the good bacteria supply. Eating yogurt with live cultures containing lactic acid bacteria is a common way of getting probiotics into your diet.<sup>4</sup>

## be *i*nformed

Other types of foods also help the good bacteria grow, including numerous fruits and vegetables such as artichokes, asparagus, bananas and onions, and whole grains such as oatmeal.<sup>5</sup>

## How do probiotics help digestive health?

Probiotics help reduce gas and cramping and prevent diarrhea. They also help with digestive tract inflammation.<sup>4</sup>



# heartburn



## What is heartburn?

Heartburn is a burning feeling in the center of your chest. It happens when stomach acid moves up and into the esophagus. Sometimes, acid reaches the mouth causing a sour taste. Unlike the stomach, acid can hurt the esophagus because it does not have the same protection. Talk to your healthcare provider if you have questions about heartburn. Tell him/her how often you experience it and if you have any shortness of breath after eating, which can be a symptom of heartburn as well.<sup>6-8</sup>



## What causes heartburn?

Heartburn can happen for many reasons.<sup>6-8</sup>

- **Certain foods**, called “triggers,” can cause the stomach to make too much acid, including caffeinated and alcoholic beverages, fried, spicy and acidic foods, chocolate and peppermint.
- **A weak valve** at the bottom of the esophagus that does not close after food goes into the stomach or opens on its own may cause heartburn because stomach acid can move up and into the esophagus. Smoking and using tobacco, as well as drinking alcoholic and caffeinated beverages, can weaken the valve.
- **Extra pressure** on the valve and the stomach can also cause heartburn. Things that increase pressure include lying down or bending over soon after eating, eating large meals, extra weight and pregnancy. Some prescription and nonprescription medications, such as steroids and aspirin, have been shown to cause irritation in the stomach and cause heartburn.



## What are the different kinds of heartburn?

Heartburn can be described in these ways:<sup>6-9</sup>

- **Occasional or infrequent heartburn** happens less than two times a week.
- **Predictable heartburn** also happens less than two times each week, but is predictable because its cause is mostly tied to trigger foods that are known in advance.
- **Frequent heartburn** takes place two or more times a week and can be tied to trigger foods, the amount of food, the time of day and other causes, such as extra weight, tobacco use and pregnancy. Heartburn can be both its own condition and a symptom of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which is more serious.





## What OTC medications treat the different kinds of heartburn?

**Antacid tablets** work to relieve occasional and predictable heartburn symptoms by balancing out the acid in your stomach. They act fast and provide short-term relief.<sup>6-9</sup>

**H2 blockers** are used to treat predictable and frequent heartburn symptoms and for people diagnosed with GERD to lower how much acid the stomach makes. This medication takes longer to start working but gives longer-lasting symptom relief.<sup>6-9</sup>

**Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs)** are also used for predictable and frequent heartburn symptoms and for people diagnosed with GERD by lowering the amount of stomach acid and healing the lining of the esophagus. PPIs take the longest to start working but provide the longest symptom relief.<sup>6-9</sup>



## What is gas and what causes it?

Gas is air leaving the body through either the mouth (belching) or rectum (flatulence) and happens to everyone about 20 times a day. It is caused by swallowing too much air and the digestion of food in the large intestine.<sup>10</sup>

## Are there OTC treatments that help relieve or prevent excess gas?

Two kinds of treatments help reduce excess gas and its symptoms like bloating and pain.

Taken after meals, **simethicone-based medications** move gas bubbles through your digestive tract more easily and reduce gas-related pain. **Digestive enzymes** help the digestive tract with foods that can cause gas and are taken before meals.<sup>10,11</sup>



## What can I do to prevent excess gas?

Gas is normal, but you can help reduce it. Do not eat foods that trigger gas, like certain fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, fatty foods, eggs, soft drinks and milk products. But, you may want to continue including them in your diet because they are considered healthy foods. So, if you plan to eat these specific foods, you can take a digestive enzyme before eating, which prevents gas from happening. Other ways to reduce gas include eating and drinking slower and no chewing gum and smoking.<sup>10</sup>

# constipation



## What is constipation?

Constipation is defined as having less than three bowel movements a week. Constipation also means having hard, dry and small stools that are hard to eliminate. It can also cause bloating and make you feel as if you have a full stomach or bowel. Normal bowel habits vary, but whenever you have a significant or prolonged change in your bowel habits, check with your healthcare provider.<sup>12,13</sup>

## What OTC medications help relieve constipation?

With any type of constipation medication, drink 48 to 64 oz. of water each day because it brings more water into the large intestine and the stool. Many laxative treatment options are available for constipation.<sup>12-14</sup>

- **Fiber laxatives** bulk up or increase the size of the stool. It takes 12 hours to three days to start providing relief, but works longer in helping to prevent constipation.



- **Stool softener laxatives** soften the stool to prevent straining. They are used to help people suffering from hemorrhoids and high blood pressure and recovering from surgery or a heart attack.



- **Enemas and suppositories** are also stimulant laxatives, but taken rectally (through the anus). An enema is liquid in a squeezable bottle. A suppository is small and solid and shaped like a bullet. Both relieve constipation by stimulating the lower part of the colon and rectum, which helps move the stool and typically work in 15 minutes to one hour.



## How can constipation be prevented?

Adding fiber, drinking more water, exercising and keeping the same routine all help prevent constipation. It is also important to go to the bathroom when you feel the need.<sup>12,13</sup>





## What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is loose, unformed, watery stools. It can cause more trips to the bathroom than usual. When you have diarrhea you may feel cramps or pain in the abdomen, have a fever and a strong feeling to go to the bathroom. There are many causes of diarrhea, including certain antibiotics, bacteria, viruses and bowel diseases and conditions. It happens when the large intestine does not absorb enough water from food as it changes into waste. Because too much water is in the stool, vitamins and minerals are not absorbed into the body, which may cause malnourishment and dehydration.<sup>15</sup>

## be *i*nformed

Dehydration is more than just being thirsty. It also includes headaches and a lack of urine production.

If children become dehydrated, they may have these symptoms, in addition to sunken eyes and a lack of tears or no tears at all. Also, infants or toddlers may have fewer wet diapers. Drinking water may help dehydration, but both adults and children should have special drinks with salts and minerals if they become dehydrated.<sup>15</sup>



### **What foods can I eat when I have diarrhea?**

Children and adults need a special diet, including bananas, rice, baked chicken with no skin, boiled potatoes, cooked carrots, crackers and toast. After diarrhea stops, you can restart a normal diet.<sup>15</sup>

## What OTC medications help relieve diarrhea?

- **Loperamide-based medications** move the stool slower in the large intestine so more water is taken out before it leaves the body. These medications come in liquids or capsules.<sup>16</sup>



- **Bismuth-based medications** reduce swelling, keep the right balance of water and prevent diarrhea-causing bacteria from growing in the intestine. In addition, these medications also help to treat nausea and vomiting. These also come in liquids, capsules and chewable tablets.<sup>16</sup>



Before taking any medication, talk to your doctor or pharmacist. Also, talk to him before giving any diarrhea-based medication to children.<sup>16</sup>

# hemorrhoids



## What are hemorrhoids?

Hemorrhoids are swollen veins inside the lower part of the rectum or outside the anus. Symptoms include anal itching, pain and blood in stools or on toilet paper because hemorrhoids sometimes break open and bleed.<sup>17</sup>

## What causes hemorrhoids?

Diarrhea, constipation, straining during bowel movements, sitting on the toilet too long and not having enough dietary fiber can cause hemorrhoids. Pregnant women can also experience hemorrhoids because of extra weight on the pelvis.<sup>17</sup>

## What can I do to relieve hemorrhoids?

Many OTC medications help treat internal and external hemorrhoids, including creams, ointments, wipes or pads and suppositories as well as oral pain relievers. They relieve pain and itching, reduce swelling and clean the area, and some offer multiple symptom relief. You can also do things that can help provide relief, such as sleeping on your side if you are pregnant; going to the bathroom when you have the need; not sitting on the toilet too long; and gently cleaning and patting the area dry. Taking several 15-minute sitz baths, which are baths with just enough water to cover the hips, can help.<sup>17,18</sup>



## References:

- 1 <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/yrdd/>
- 2 [http://my.clevelandclinic.org/anatomy/digestive\\_system/hic\\_the\\_structure\\_and\\_function\\_of\\_the\\_digestive\\_system.aspx](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/anatomy/digestive_system/hic_the_structure_and_function_of_the_digestive_system.aspx)
- 3 <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002470.htm>
- 4 <http://www.webmd.com/digestive-disorders/tc/probiotics-topic-overview>
- 5 <http://www.webmd.com/ibs/features/supplements-for-ibs-what-works>
- 6 <http://patients.gi.org/topics/acid-reflux/>
- 7 [http://www.emedicinehealth.com/heartburn\\_faqs/article\\_em.htm](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/heartburn_faqs/article_em.htm)
- 8 <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/gerd/>
- 9 <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/drugs-procedures-devices/over-the-counter/antacids-and-acid-reducers-otc-relief-for-heartburn-and-acid-reflux.html>
- 10 <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/gas/>
- 11 <http://www.medicinenet.com/simethicone/article.htm>
- 12 <http://www.webmd.com/digestive-disorders/digestive-diseases-constipation>
- 13 <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/constipation/>
- 14 [http://www.medicinenet.com/laxatives\\_for\\_constipation/page3.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/laxatives_for_constipation/page3.htm)
- 15 [http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/diarrhea\\_ez](http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/diarrhea_ez)
- 16 <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/drugs-procedures-devices/over-the-counter/antidiarrheal-medicines-otc-relief-for-diarrhea.html>
- 17 <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hemorrhoids/>
- 18 <http://www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/hemorrhoids-treatment-overview>

This publication should be used for general educational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Although it is intended to be accurate, neither Walgreen Co., its subsidiaries or affiliates, nor any other party assumes liability for loss or damage due to reliance on this material. Advances in medicine may cause this information to become outdated, invalid or subject to debate. This information is not intended to create any warranty, and ALL SUCH WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING ANY WARRANTY OF FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE, ARE HEREBY DISCLAIMED. If you are in need of immediate medical attention or have a medical question, contact your medical professional.



## Questions about digestive tract health and which products are right for you?

Walgreens pharmacists can help you find the best treatments to support your digestive health. Consult with one of our knowledgeable pharmacists in person or log on to **Walgreens.com/PharmacyChat** to “talk” live with a pharmacy professional any time, day or night.