

Stomach ache and abdominal pain

Introduction

Five tips for a healthy tummy

- **Eat healthily and regularly.** It is easy to spend our working lives gulping down food between meetings and then sitting in front of the TV with a takeaway in the evenings, but eating this way can cause problems with your digestive system.
- **Stop smoking.** Smoking can weaken the muscle that controls the lower end of the oesophagus (gullet), causing heartburn.
- **Lose excess weight and exercise regularly.** If you are overweight, your tummy fat puts pressure on your stomach and can cause heartburn.
- **Do not binge drink.** This increases acid production in your stomach and can cause heartburn, as well as making other digestive disorders worse.
- **Beat stress.** Anxiety and worry can upset the delicate balance of digestion and worsen digestive conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome.

A stomach ache usually refers to cramps or a dull ache in the belly (abdomen). It is normally short lived and caused by a minor upset or bug.

Severe abdominal pain is a greater cause for concern. If it starts suddenly and unexpectedly, it should be regarded as a medical emergency, especially if the pain is concentrated in a particular area. Call your DOCTOR as soon as possible or go to [your nearest hospital accident and emergency \(A&E\)](#) department if this is the case.

This topic covers the most common reasons for:

- sudden stomach cramps
- sudden, severe abdominal pain in a particular area of your belly
- abdominal pain that has lasted a long time or that keeps returning

If you feel pain in the area around your ribs, read about [chest pain](#) for information and advice.

Stomach cramps due to trapped wind

Stomach cramps are often due to [trapped wind](#) and bloating. This is an extremely common problem that can be embarrassing but is easily dealt with – your chemist will be able to recommend a product, such as buscopan or mebeverine, which can be bought over the counter to treat the problem.

Sudden stomach cramps with diarrhoea

If your stomach cramps have started recently and you also have [diarrhoea](#), the cause is probably a tummy bug ([gastroenteritis](#)). This means you have a viral or bacterial infection of the stomach and bowel, which should get better without treatment after a few days. A common cause of gastroenteritis is a [norovirus](#).

Severe stomach cramps and diarrhoea that make you feel very ill (for example, causing chills or a fever) could be due to a more serious infection, such as [food poisoning](#). This also usually gets better on its own without treatment.

If your stomach cramps and diarrhoea continue for more than a few days, you may have a long-term condition, such as [irritable bowel syndrome \(IBS\)](#).

Sudden, severe abdominal pain

If you have sudden, agonising pain in a particular area of your belly, call your DOCTOR immediately or go to your nearest A&E department. It may be a sign of a serious illness that will rapidly get worse without treatment.

The most common causes of sudden, severe abdominal pain include:

- [appendicitis](#) – the swelling of the appendix (a finger-like pouch connected to the large intestine), which causes agonising pain in the lower right-hand side of your abdomen and means your appendix will need to be removed
- a perforated [peptic ulcer](#) – an open sore that develops on the inside lining of your stomach or duodenum (upper small intestine) that has broken through the lining
- [gallstones](#) – small stones that form in the gallbladder, which may mean the gallbladder will need to be removed
- [kidney stones](#) – small stones may be passed out in your urine, but larger stones may block the kidney tubes and you will need to go to hospital to have these broken up
- [diverticulitis](#) – inflammation of the small pouches that are part of the bowel

Sometimes, sudden and severe pain in your abdomen can also be caused by an infection of the stomach and bowel (gastroenteritis). It may also be caused by a [pulled muscle](#) in your abdomen or an injury.

Click on the links above for more information on these conditions. If your DOCTOR suspects that you have appendicitis, they will refer you to hospital immediately.

Long-term or recurring abdominal pain

Adults who have persistent or repeated episodes of abdominal pain should see their DOCTOR. However, there is no need to panic as the cause is often not serious and can be managed.

Common causes in adults include:

- [irritable bowel syndrome](#) – a common condition where the muscle in the bowel wall tends to go into spasm (tightens); pain is often relieved when you go to the toilet
- [Crohn's disease](#) – a long-term condition that causes inflammation of the lining of the digestive system
- a [urinary tract infection](#) that keeps returning (you will usually feel a burning sensation when you urinate)
- a long-term [peptic ulcer](#) – an open sore that develops on the inside lining of your stomach or duodenum (upper small intestine)
- [constipation](#)

- [heartburn and acid reflux](#) – stomach acid leaks from the stomach and up into the oesophagus, the tube that runs from the mouth to the stomach
- [period pain](#) – painful muscle cramps in women that are linked to the [menstrual cycle](#)

Common causes in children include:

- [periodic syndrome](#) (similar to irritable bowel syndrome in adults) – children have recurring episodes of tummy pain
- [constipation](#)
- a [urinary tract infection](#) that keeps returning
- [anxiety](#)
- [heartburn and acid reflux](#)