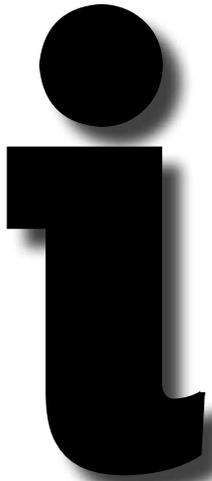


Looking after your insides (page 1 of 5)



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You are entitled to a copy of any letter we write about you. Please ask if you want one when you come to the hospital.

If you are unhappy with the advice you have been given by your GP, consultant, or another healthcare professional, you may ask for a second (or further) opinion.

The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk if you would like a reference list.

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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 off just with 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. Having said that, you might come to regret choosing to eat that tempting, but particularly spicy, curry. That's unlikely to give you anything more than a short-lived stomach upset. But if you often 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.

- Small meals taken regularly (every 4–5 hours) are better for you than long periods without food, followed by a heavy meal. Starchy snacks (biscuits, cakes, doughnuts, crisps) between meals are not a good idea.
- Large, rich meals late at night should be avoided if possible, especially for older people. A cooked meal is more easily digested in the middle of the day.
- Make sure that you have plenty to drink. This means you should try to have at least one and a half litres (two and a half pints) of liquid a day, (mostly water) – especially if you become ill with an infection. Even if you don't have a temperature, the hotter the weather, the more fluid you will need.

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, vegetables and wholemeal bread. There is strong evidence that eating five pieces of fruit a day has a number of benefits. In addition, add two tablespoons of coarse bran (which can be bought from a health food shop or chemist) to your breakfast cereal. This provides the bulk that your insides need for good digestion and regular bowels.
- Cut down fat. Eat more lean meat and fish, drink skimmed or semi-skimmed milk, and grill rather than fry foods. When possible use sunflower, soya or corn oil for cooking and choose nondairy 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 1/2 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 in Indian, Thai or Chinese food. But, some people do find their intestines are 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. If you already have a problem such as heartburn or an irritable bowel, then it's wise to keep off them altogether.

Should I take extra vitamins?

A healthy balanced diet contains all the vitamins you need. Doctors are sure that taking supplements of extra vitamins has no value to your health. Do not be misled by advertisements about vitamin supplements which suggest that you will, in some way or another, feel better for taking these products. The only benefit will be to the balance sheet of the company that sells you these products.

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 glass of wine, or a single 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 is also an important risk factor for stomach cancer.

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, you can lessen your chances of getting it. Poor hygiene can certainly increase your chance of getting food poisoning and gastroenteritis (an infection in the bowel).

Always wash your hands after visiting the toilet and before handling food.

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 allowed to warm up in the boot of a car on a warm day or if they are not kept as cold as they should be if the fridge is either overloaded or not working well. 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. 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 a change of diet or too much alcohol.

- In some foreign countries, where hygiene may be poor, drink only boiled or bottled water.
- Choose food with care, avoiding ice, 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 prepared.

Why do I seem to get stomach upsets after certain foods?

Some 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 some people may have what is called a food intolerance when 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 sign or symptom that just does not go away, it is usually a good idea to consult your GP. 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 occurs when you can't cope with the demands made on you. Stress or anxiety 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.
- 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 that your doctor may have prescribed can give rise to side effects which may upset your insides and may cause indigestion, diarrhoea or constipation.

Aspirin and medicines that are used to treat arthritis should be avoided if you have an ulcer or are prone to indigestion. Many of these drugs are known as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and are available over-the-counter for painful conditions of joints and muscles.

Paracetamol is a useful alternative to them and to aspirin and is the best 'firstline' pain reliever. 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. This is due to a change in the balance of hormones. Late in pregnancy some women may find they are constipated as their growing baby leads to pressure on the bowel. Heartburn is also quite common at this time. 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 they settle down and should give no cause for concern. But you should see your GP about:

- A sudden, persistent change in the pattern of how your bowels work
- Bleeding from the back passage (anus)
- Increasing heartburn, indigestion or other stomach pain
- Losing weight unexpectedly
- Persistent vomiting.

With acknowledgements to Core – the Digestive Disorders Foundation in association with the British Society of Gastroenterology and the Primary Care Society for Gastroenterology

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