



# Understanding GI Problems

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FRANKLIN SQUARE HEALTH GROUP – GI ASSOCIATES

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## Hemorrhoids

Hemorrhoids are swollen veins in the anus or lower rectum. They can be placed into two main categories: **internal hemorrhoids** and **external hemorrhoids**. Internal hemorrhoids are in the rectum and typically are not seen or felt. They don't have pain fibers so they present with either painless bleeding or pain secondary to the spasm of the surrounding muscles when they swell. External hemorrhoids are found under the skin around the anus and can be visualized and felt. They can also bleed and become painful.

### What Causes Hemorrhoids?

Many factors contribute to the development of hemorrhoids. **Straining**, which is often secondary to a low fiber diet, is a common cause. Other factors include:

- heavy lifting
- obesity
- diarrhea
- constipation
- prolonged sitting
- pregnancy
- bad posture
- spinal cord injury

- rectal surgery
- colon cancer

### Signs and Symptoms of Hemorrhoids

**Itching, bleeding** and **pain** are common symptoms of hemorrhoids.

Internal hemorrhoids may bleed without any associated pain. External hemorrhoids can be seen and felt and can become quite painful. A **thrombosed external hemorrhoid** is one in which a blood clot develops, resulting in severe pain. It can appear as a dark blue lump protruding from the anus. External hemorrhoids can usually be felt as a lump on digital rectal exam.



### Hemorrhoid Treatment

How do you get rid of a hemorrhoid?

Many **resolve on their own** or through **conservative treatment** such as over-the-counter creams or suppositories and stool softeners.

**Prevention** is the best strategy and would include a high fiber diet and weight loss. However, **if symptoms persist or recur, it is time to see a hemorrhoid doctor.**

Typically, a gastroenterologist or a surgeon sees patients for hemorrhoids, although the vast majority of cases do not need surgical intervention.

A gastroenterologist can treat hemorrhoids through a variety of procedures. These include **infra-red coagulation (IRC)**, injecting the hemorrhoid to make it hard/sclerose it, or choking the blood supply to the hemorrhoid with a small rubber band.

**Hemorrhoid surgery** is reserved for those who have failed more conservative treatment, or for very large hemorrhoids. 🩺

# Abdominal Bloating

Abdominal bloating is the abnormal swelling or distension of the abdomen, resulting in a full, tight feeling. This can result in tummy pain and can be accompanied by growling or rumbling noises.

## What causes bloating in the stomach?

**Gas** is the most common cause of bloating. Gas builds up in the stomach as a product of digestion and due to swallowed air. Eating or drinking too fast, sometimes even chewing gum can result in an above average amount of swallowed air. Other causes include:

- ➔ Smoking
- ➔ Fatty food consumption
- ➔ Weight gain
- ➔ Hormonal changes, especially in females
- ➔ Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia
- ➔ Infections
- ➔ Food intolerance
- ➔ Inflammatory Bowel Disease such as Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis
- ➔ Ascites
- ➔ Pancreatic Insufficiency

In the following we discuss two major causes of bloating:

- ➔ Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- ➔ Celiac Disease

## Irritable Bowel Syndrome

### What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder that effects the **large intestine**, also known as the colon. It effects twice as many women as men and is typically



found in individuals under the age of 45. It is estimated to affect up to 15 percent of people.

### What are the symptoms of IBS?

Along with excessive gas and bloating (more than half of affected patients report bloating), other symptoms include **abdominal pain, cramping, diarrhea, constipation or alternating periods of diarrhea and constipation.**

## Celiac Disease

### What is celiac disease?

Celiac Disease is an autoimmune disorder in which the consumption of **gluten** (found in wheat, rye and barley) leads to **damage to villi** (small finger like extensions in the walls of the small intestine). Because of this damage, nutrients cannot be properly absorbed.

### What are the Celiac Disease symptoms?

Along with excessive gas and bloating, other symptoms include **diarrhea, constipation, stomach pain, nausea, anemia, a rash known as dermatitis herpetiformis, reduced bone density, headaches, fatigue, ulcers in the**



**mouth, bone and joint pain, heartburn, and weight loss.**

## Getting rid of bloating

### Simple measures

Treating symptoms depends on the underlying cause. However, for common causes such obesity or those related to diet, simple measures such **reducing the consumption of fatty or gas producing foods** such as cabbage, beans and lentils can help.

**Reducing carbonated beverage consumption**, avoiding drinking through a straw and eating slowly can assist as well.

Chewing gum can cause one to swallow extra air, so cutting back on this activity can improve symptoms.

If you are lactose intolerant, you should use **lactose-free** dairy products.

For those patients with IBS, avoiding certain food can help alleviate symptoms including bloating.

Indigestible carbohydrates known by the acronym FODMAPS can cause IBS symptoms to flare.

**Foods high in FODMAPS that should be avoided** include:

- wheat, onions, garlic, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, artichokes, beans, apples, pears, watermelon, "sugar alcohols" found in sugar-free foods and chewing gum

### Over-the-counter medications

Simple over-the-counter medications may help as well. **Alpha-D-galactosidase** is an enzyme that breaks down indigestible sugars that are found in beans and some vegetables and can be found in over-the-counter medications.

**Simethicone tablets** can alleviate symptoms of gas and bloating.

**Lactase** is the enzyme that breaks down lactose. For those with lactose intolerance, lactase containing medications may help.

**Smoking cessation** can help smokers who feel bloated.

For those in whom constipation is causing bloating, increasing **magnesium** intake and an increase in physical activity can help reduce constipation.

**Probiotic supplements**, which are over-the-counter as well, improve the bacterial environment in the gut and can reduce excessive gas and bloating.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease can present with altered muscle function of the digestive tract, leading to muscle spasms. **Peppermint oil** can reduce muscle spasms in those with IBS, reducing bloating. **Antispasmodic drugs** will achieve the same effect.

### GI doctors

For the IBS patients whose symptoms are not relieved by such conservative measures, consulting with a gastroenterologist is the next appropriate step. She/he will take a careful **history**, perform a **physical exam** and may also do **blood tests**, **biopsies** and an **endoscopic exam** as confirmatory measures in establishing the diagnosis.

For patients who suspect celiac disease, seeing a gastroenterologist should be a priority. The workup is similar to that for IBS in terms of tests and biopsies. The exception is that an **upper endoscopy** may be performed as opposed to a colonoscopy.

More serious suspected causes of bloating such as ascites and pancreatic insufficiency should be worked up by a

specialist such as a gastroenterologist as soon as possible. 

## Abdominal Pain

### What Causes Abdominal Pain?

The abdomen is the anatomic area that extends from the bottom of the breastbone to the pelvis. It contains numerous organs and all of these can be a source of abdominal pain.

Abdominal pain can be mild and due to a **passing infection** or **spoiled food** or it can be due to life threatening conditions such as **ischemic bowel**, where the blood supply to a portion of the intestines is interrupted.

Abdominal pain can also result from **gastrointestinal issues**. These include Celiac Disease, IBS, IBD, heartburn or GERD.

More serious causes of abdominal pain can include **pancreatitis**, **diverticulitis** and even **colon cancer**. Colon cancer is one of the most prevalent forms of cancer in the world. Colon cancer symptoms can also include rectal bleeding and constipation. Sometimes, **it may not present with any symptoms**.

In women, **menstrual pain** can present as abdominal pain, cramping and bloating.

### What is endoscopy?

In diagnosing stomach pain causes, the gastroenterologist may perform a variety of tests including an upper GI endoscopy.


Also known as EGD, short for esophagogastroduodenoscopy, this test involves **visualizing the esophagus, the stomach and the first part of the small intestine** with a thin, flexible tube that has a small digital camera at the end of it.

The diagnosis of colon cancer also involves endoscopy, but a lower endoscopy also known as a colonoscopy.

### What to do

Mild cases typically resolve on their own.

Abdominal pain causes due to gastrointestinal issues warrant a trip to the GI doctor.

For severe, unremitting pain in the abdomen that is accompanied by symptoms such as bleeding, fever and vomiting, one should be transported to the nearest emergency room. 

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