

Improving Your Digestion

Common digestive complaints — such as diarrhea, constipation, acid reflux, and heartburn — may become more prevalent with age. Some people may find that they have to make changes to their eating habits to avoid discomfort.

Eating a healthy diet that includes plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins and cutting back on fatty and fried foods may help decrease digestive woes. Other ways to improve your digestion include:

- **Drink water.** It is recommended that people drink 6-8 glasses of water per day. If you live in a hot or dry climate or are an active person, you may need to drink more to stay hydrated.
- **Exercise.** Getting regular exercise will help your digestive system to function properly. Most experts recommend a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise 4-5 days a week. If you can't devote a full 30 minutes to exercise, try three 10-minute sessions per day.
- **Cut back on caffeine and alcohol.** Both caffeine and alcohol have a dehydrating effect and may contribute to the physical irritation that causes heartburn or acid reflux.
- **If you smoke, quit.** Smoking contributes to a number of health conditions that may affect digestion. In addition, it dulls the taste buds, which may make you more prone to add excess salt or other spices to your food.
- **Be cautious about using over-the-counter medications.** Some of these medications may actually worsen digestive conditions. Seek your doctor's advice if you need these medications to manage discomfort.



- **Wash your hands before and after cooking a meal.** It is important to wash your hands when preparing food to prevent the spread of bacteria and germs that may cause digestive illness. Use hot water and soap and rub vigorously for at least 20 seconds. Dry your hands with a clean towel.
 - **Keep cooking areas clean.** Wash cutting boards and utensils and clean sinks and counters frequently, especially after handling uncooked meat. Wash dishes in a dishwasher (when possible) to sterilize them.
 - **Cook food properly.** Follow the instructions on the package when cooking poultry, meat, fish, or eggs. Improper cooking may result in food poisoning.
 - **Slow down.** Take the time to chew your food and savor your meals. This will prevent overeating and may help with managing stress, which is a common cause of digestive issues.
 - **Do not eat within three hours of your bedtime.** Laying down too soon after eating may trigger digestive discomfort.
 - **Take bathroom breaks when needed.** Sometimes when people are busy they forget to tend to personal needs. This can disrupt the digestive system and may lead to discomfort.
- If you are having digestive issues on a frequent basis, it is important to talk to your doctor. He or she can look for underlying medical concerns and may be able to pinpoint lifestyle issues that are contributing to the problem, such as stress or excessive caffeine or alcohol use. In addition, your doctor can tell you if the digestive issues are a side effect of a prescribed medication.