

Editorial on Gastrointestinal & Digestive System

Mohamed Abd- El- Wahab Ali

Gastroenterology center, University of Mansoura, Egypt, wahab_m_eg@yahoo.com

Gastrointestinal diseases affect the gastrointestinal (GI) tract from the mouth to the anus. There are two types: functional and structural. Some examples include nausea/vomiting, food poisoning, lactose intolerance and diarrhea.

Functional diseases are those in which the GI tract looks normal when examined, but doesn't move properly. They are the most common problems affecting the GI tract (including the colon and rectum). Constipation, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), nausea, food poisoning, gas, bloating, GERD and diarrhea are common examples.

Many factors may upset your GI tract and its motility (ability to keep moving), including:

- Eating a diet low in fiber.
- Not getting enough exercise.
- Traveling or other changes in routine.
- Eating large amounts of dairy products.
- Stress.
- Resisting the urge to have a bowel movement, possibly because of hemorrhoids.
- Overusing anti-diarrheal medications that, over time, weaken the bowel muscle movements called motility.
- Taking antacid medicines containing calcium or aluminum.
- Taking certain medicines (especially antidepressants, iron pills and strong pain medicines such as narcotics).
- Pregnancy.

When stomach acid backs up into your esophagus - a condition called acid reflux - you may feel a burning pain in the middle of your chest. It often occurs after meals or at night, says Neville Bamji, MD, a clinical instructor of medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and a gastroenterologist with New York Gastroenterology Associates.

While it's common for people to experience acid reflux and heartburn once in a while, having symptoms that affect your daily life or occur at least twice each week could be a sign of GERD, a chronic digestive disease that affects 20 percent of Americans, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). If you experience persistent heartburn, bad breath, tooth erosion, nausea, pain in your chest or upper part of your abdomen, or have trouble swallowing or breathing, see your doctor.

Most people find relief by avoiding the foods and beverages that trigger their symptoms and/or taking over-the-counter

antacids or other medication that reduces stomach acid production and inflammation of the esophagus. In addition, lifestyle changes like elevating the head of the bed, not lying down after a meal, avoiding tight-fitting clothing, and quitting smoking can also help. However, some cases of GERD require stronger treatment, such as medication or surgery.

Gallstones are hard deposits that form in your gallbladder - a small, pear-shaped sac that stores and secretes bile for digestion. Nearly one million Americans are found to have gallstones every year, according to the American Gastroenterological Association. Gallstones can form when there's too much cholesterol or waste in your bile, or if your gallbladder doesn't empty properly.

When gallstones block the ducts leading from your gallbladder to your intestines, they can cause sharp pain in your upper-right abdomen. Medication sometimes dissolves gallstones, but if that doesn't work, the next step is surgery to remove the gallbladder.

An estimated 1 in 133 Americans - about 1 percent of the population - has celiac disease, according to Beyond Celiac (formerly the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness). The group also estimates that more than 80 percent of people with celiac disease don't know they have it or have been misdiagnosed with a different condition.

Celiac disease is a serious sensitivity to gluten, which is a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. Eat gluten, and your immune system goes on the attack: It damages your villi, the fingerlike protrusions in your small intestines that help you absorb nutrients from the foods you eat. In children, symptoms may include abdominal pain and bloating, diarrhea, constipation, vomiting, and weight loss. Symptoms in adults can also include anemia, fatigue, bone loss, depression, and seizures.

Yet some people may not have any symptoms. The only treatment for celiac disease is to completely avoid eating gluten. Common alternatives to gluten include brown rice, quinoa, lentils, soy flour, corn flour, and amaranth.

Crohn's disease is part of a group of digestive conditions called inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Crohn's can affect any part of the GI tract but most commonly affects the terminal ileum, which connects the end of the small bowel and the beginning of the colon. As many as 780,000 Americans may be affected by Crohn's, according to the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation (CCFA).

Ulcerative colitis is another inflammatory bowel disease that may affect as many as 907,000 Americans, according to the CCFA. The symptoms of ulcerative colitis are very similar to those of Crohn's, but the part of the digestive tract affected is solely the large intestine, also known as the colon.