

Abdominal Pain

What is abdominal pain?

Abdominal pain is aching or cramping in your belly. The abdomen, or belly, is the area between the chest and the pelvis. The pain can range from mild discomfort to cramping or severe pain.

What is the cause?

Many things can cause abdominal pain and it can sometimes be hard to know the exact cause of the pain. Examples of some of the common causes of pain in the abdomen are:

- Indigestion or heartburn
- Stomach flu
- Food poisoning
- Food allergy
- Stress and anxiety
- Lactose intolerance, which is a problem that causes trouble digesting milk and milk products
- Gastritis, which is an irritation of the stomach lining
- Constipation
- Menstruation
- Ulcers
- Hernia
- Urinary tract infection
- Kidney stones
- Muscle strain
- Disease or infection in the uterus
- Pregnancy
- Cramping of the uterus during childbirth or breast-feeding

Sometimes abdominal pain is caused by a problem in another part of the body, such as the lungs or the heart. For example, a heart attack can cause upper abdominal pain.

You cannot always tell how serious the cause is from the severity of the pain. Mild conditions such as gas or stomach flu may cause severe pain, while more serious problems such as cancer may cause relatively mild pain.

How is it treated?

The treatment depends on the cause of the pain. Often there are simple things you can do at home to feel better.

If you go to your healthcare provider's office for treatment, your provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. It will be helpful if you can tell your provider:

- How long ago you first felt the pain
- Where it hurts
- When it hurts
- How long it hurts (minutes or hours at a time)
- What you do that makes it hurt (for example, eat)
- What, if anything, you have done that makes it better (for example, avoiding fatty foods)

You may have some tests, such as blood tests or X-rays. Your treatment will depend on what is causing the pain.

How can I help take care of myself?

Here are some things you can do that might help you feel better.

- Put a heating pad set at low or a covered hot water bottle on your belly.
- Take a warm bath.
- If the cramps are stress-related, relaxation techniques may help.
- If you also have gas and bloating, it may be relieved with nonprescription medicine that contains simethicone.
- Antacids may help to relieve indigestion, heartburn, and nausea.
- Nonprescription pain relievers such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen can help relieve menstrual or muscle pain, but aspirin and ibuprofen can make an upset stomach worse.

If you have seen your healthcare provider about the pain, follow his or her instructions. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear test results
- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

Call 911 right away if you have abdominal pain along with jaw, arm, shoulder, chest, or back pain; sweating; nausea; shortness of breath; or anxiety. These symptoms may mean you are having a heart attack.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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