

Stay Well: How do I deal with my indigestion?

Experts explain what causes indigestion and how you can avoid this unpleasant gastrointestinal complaint. By *Suzanne Harrington*

It's not just the time of year romantically known by retail as the Primary Gifting Period, but it's also the primary indigestion period.

While you are having a fantastic festive time — guzzling mince pies, cocktails and canapes, as a warm up for the all-you-can-eat buffet that is Christmas Day - your digestive system will be putting in double shifts.

It has no clue about Christmas, only that it's having to process unexpected quantities of unexpected items, from champagne and brandy butter to cheeses and chocolates via parsnips and brussels sprouts.

It doesn't like this unexpected overload, and may express its displeasure in the only way it knows how — by giving you indigestion.

We've all been there. Discomfort, a sense of over-fullness, heartburn, burping from both ends. Indigestion, while commonplace, is highly preventable, although it can sometimes be a symptom of something which may need further investigating. Here's what you need to know about this most familiar yet unpleasant condition.

What exactly is indigestion?

"Indigestion is the name given to a group of symptoms involving the gastrointestinal tract," says Dr Sinead Byrne MD, Consultant Gastroenterologist, Dublin Gastroenterology and Endoscopy Group at the Mater Private Hospital Dublin. "It is also known as dyspepsia."

What are the symptoms?

"Feeling of fullness after eating, discomfort in the upper abdomen, nausea and / or vomiting, heartburn, belching, gurgling stomach noises, bloating, trapped wind," lists Dr Byrne.

These are the more common or garden symptoms many of us will have experienced at least once or twice. Think Christmas dinner, or having a heavy meal late at night.

However, continues Dr Byrne, "Other, more potentially serious, symptoms include vomiting blood, having dark or black bowel movements, difficulty swallowing, and severe unintentional weight loss. You should consult your doctor if you have any of these potentially serious symptoms, or if your symptoms of dyspepsia are persistent (lasting more than two weeks) and do not respond to over-the-counter medications."

Are there different types of indigestion?

"There are two kinds of indigestion — post-prandial dyspepsia and epigastric pain (EPS)," says Professor Anthony O'Connor consultant gastroenterologist at Tallaght University Hospital.

He explains how post-prandial dyspepsia happens after eating or drinking, and can usually be treated by straightforward over-the-counter products like Gaviscon, Rennie's

or even a natural digestive such as peppermint tea.

EPS is when you have discomfort in the upper part of your abdomen just below your rib cage, in an area called the epigastrium — the pancreas and duodenum are located in the epigastrium.

“The initial treatment for post-prandial dyspepsia and EPS is the same,” says Professor O’Connor. “With really difficult cases, third line interventions are used.”

What about pregnancy, which often features indigestion?

“In pregnancy, reflux is common and Gaviscon is the best first option and is considered safe,” he says. “I find a lot of pregnant patients will do better if they eat smaller, more frequent meals. Acid inhibitors are generally safe in pregnancy but are used with a bit more caution, particularly in the first trimester.”

What causes indigestion?

“Multiple factors can cause indigestion, which can include lifestyle factors, medications, and medical factors,” says Dr Byrne.

Lifestyle causes include “eating a lot of fatty or greasy foods regularly — also, spicy foods can trigger it. Eating very large meals, particularly eating a large meal late in the evening.”

She also adds, “smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, stress and little or no exercise”.

Medications can contribute too. “Overuse of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can cause indigestion,” Dr Byrne says.

Medical causes of indigestion can include acid reflux. “This is when your food and drink can regurgitate back up into the oesophagus from your stomach — it is acidic and can cause symptoms of indigestion such as heartburn, vomiting or chest discomfort,” says Dr Byrne.

Other medical causes can include an ulcer in the stomach or duodenum, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (“a very common condition which can result in multiple different symptoms of indigestion”); gastritis (“an inflammation of the lining of the stomach and a common cause of indigestion”); coeliac disease (“intolerances to dietary agents such as lactose can cause symptoms of dyspepsia”); or gallstones (“these can produce symptoms very similar to indigestion”).

Dr Byrne adds: “Stomach cancer is a rare condition, but indigestion can be one of its symptoms.” And then there’s *Helicobacter Pylori*, “a bacterial infection in the stomach which can result in indigestion.”

Helicobacter what?

“One of the really common causes of indigestion is infection by *Helicobacter pylori*, a type

of bacteria that lives in the stomach,” explains Professor O’Connor.

“It was first discovered by two Australian doctors. Before then, it was thought bacteria couldn’t live inside the stomach because of stomach acid.” (These two doctors — Barry Marshall and Robin Warren — won the 2005 Nobel Prize for physiology for their discovery).

Are there any other causes?

“Indigestion can also be caused by stress, anxiety and depression,” says Professor O’Connor. “If you have depression and anxiety, there may be an imbalance in gut hormones like serotonin, resulting in conditions like dyspepsia or IBS. In terms of research, we are still only scratching the surface.”

“A side effect of anti-depressants such as Prozac can be indigestion, so if this happens, I usually advise patients to take their medication at night. Also, people who are depressed tend to drink more alcohol, which is linked to indigestion.”

“Some over-the-counter medicines like ibuprofen and aspirin can also trigger indigestion. As can steroids.”

Can I do anything to prevent indigestion?

Yes, you absolutely can. Common or garden indigestion is very preventable — here’s how:

“Try to avoid foods which may trigger symptoms of indigestion,” says Dr Byrne. “Typically these are heavy greasy foods, with high fat content, and carbonated drinks. Try to eat smaller, more frequent meals throughout the day and avoid eating late at night.”

“Try to eat slowly. Avoid lying down straight away after eating a meal. Keep alcohol within recommended limits, and do not smoke - try to reduce/stop if you do.”

“Limit the amounts of coffee, tea and soft drinks you consume.”

“Keep a healthy weight. Try to get at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise daily, and incorporate good sleeping habits into your regular routine.”

As well as avoiding indigestion-inducers like spicy junk food washed down by loads of booze late at night, Professor O’Connor reminds us: “Your gut loves routine. It likes to eat roughly the same kind of food at roughly the same time each day. If you are stressed you may eat too quickly. To manage indigestion, look at your routine. Eat regularly, don’t overeat, don’t eat too quickly, don’t skip meals.”

Can your psychological or emotional state trigger indigestion?

“Stress can exacerbate all gastrointestinal symptoms, so it is important to be mindful of

the effects of stress,” says Dr Byrne.

“It is not always possible to avoid stress, so it is important to have an outlet for stress, which you can use as needed. Often, this can be exercise, someone to talk to, or even a walk in the fresh air to clear your head.”

When should you see a doctor about indigestion?

“If you are experiencing weight loss, or are vomiting, or have a change in bowel habit, or there is blood in your vomit, get it checked out,” says Professor O’Connor. “If you’re over 50 with these symptoms, I’d recommend an endoscopy.

“Younger people who may be having recurrent symptoms of indigestion — that is, three times a week or more — may be treated with a six- to eight-week course of acid inhibitors. That’s usually enough for the majority of people.”

How is indigestion diagnosed?

“Your doctor will talk with you about your symptoms and perform a physical examination,” says Dr Byrne. “They may also order some tests to determine the cause. These tests can include, blood tests, stool tests, or an X-ray or ultrasound.

“Sometimes your doctor will arrange an upper endoscopy (gastroscopy) to look inside your stomach and duodenum. This can provide

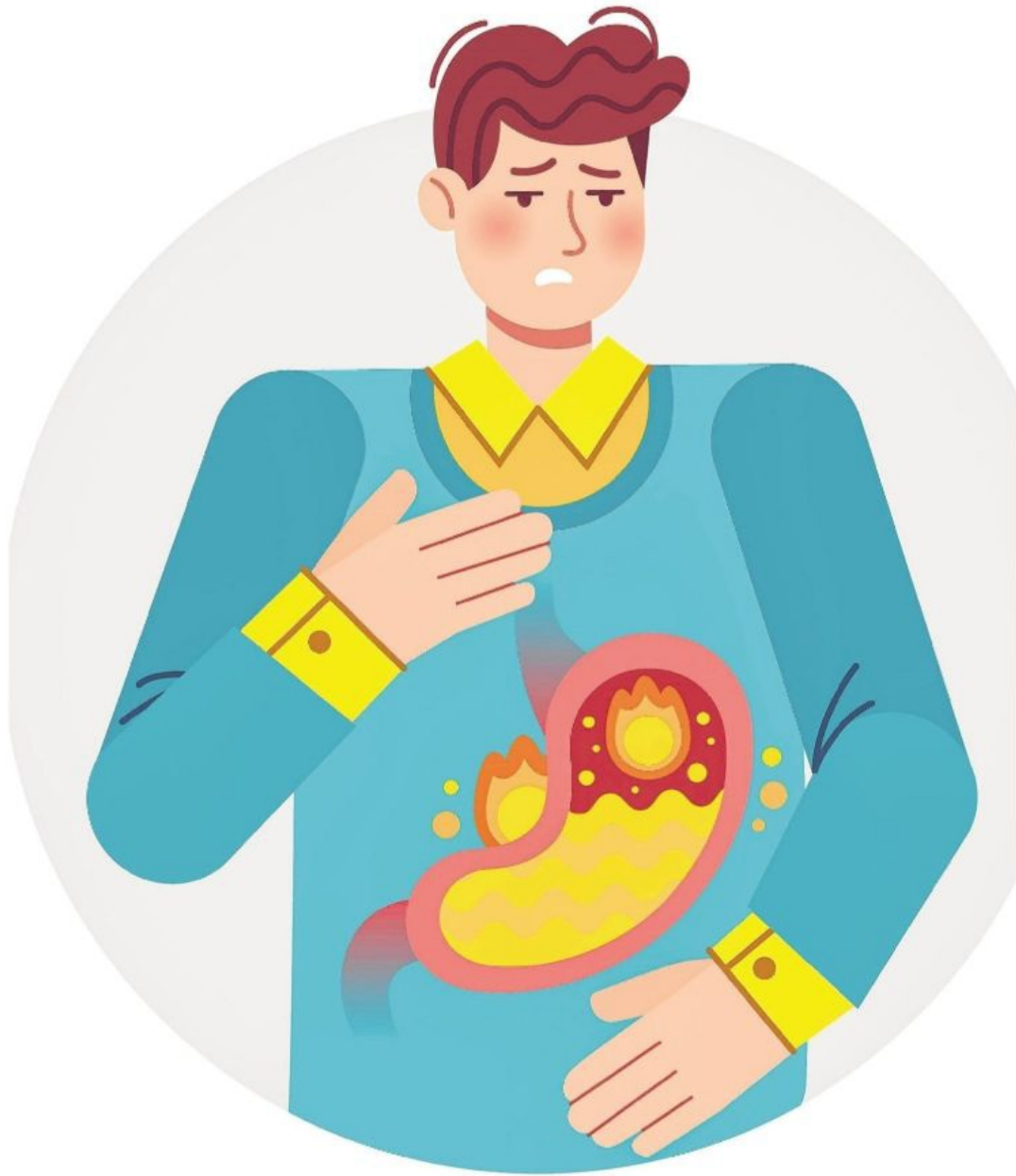
more detailed information to help diagnose the cause of the indigestion and guide treatment.”

Which medicines are good for indigestion?

“Some over-the-counter medicines can help symptoms,” says Dr Byrne. “These include Gaviscon or Maalox which work by neutralising the acid in your stomach or oesophagus. These are particularly good for occasional heartburn. Proton Pump Inhibitors help by blocking the production of acid in your stomach. You should talk to your doctor before taking these medications long term.”

For food-induced indigestion, try Hara Hachi Bu. No, not a medicine, but the traditional Japanese practice of stopping eating when you feel 80pc full. It can’t hurt.

‘Pregnant patients will do better if they eat small, frequent meals. Acid inhibitors are safe but are used with caution in the first trimester’



Possible causes of indigestion include stomach bacteria, eating too much greasy food, and high stress.
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