

GUT PROBLEMS



DIGESTIVE TRACT SYMPTOMS ARE VERY

common in the community. 20-40% of the adult population will experience such symptoms every year. The most common digestive conditions are: Functional Dyspepsia (FD), Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), and Gastro Esophageal Reflux Disease (GERD). These affect the stomach, intestines and oesophagus (swallowing passage between the mouth and stomach) respectively. FD, IBS and GERD are very common, and each affects 10-20% of the adult population. Although they are not thought to harm a person's health or cause complications, they can cause significant symptoms and can impair one's quality of life.

FD and IBS are currently classified as neuromotility disorders. These are complex conditions involving the nerves and muscles of the digestive tract. They cause abnormal sensation and movement of the digestive tract, giving rise to digestive symptoms. The more common symptoms include:

- abdominal discomfort, pain and cramping
- bloating, burping and flatus
- diarrhoea, constipation and stool changes

GERD encompasses a spectrum of disorders.

In Asia, the most common type of GERD is also considered a nerve sensitivity problem. However, GERD can also be caused by acid damage due to problems with the one-way valve that normally keeps acid within the stomach. The common symptoms of GERD are:

- heartburn
- sour taste in mouth
- chest pain
- sore throat

Correct management entails making the correct diagnosis and excluding more serious conditions that may affect one's health. These include digestive tract infections, ulcers and cancers. Thereafter, treatment needs to be individualized for each patient. The doctor will use a combination of medication, lifestyle adjustment and diet control to help patients cope with symptoms.

Today's science is not yet adequate to enable us to prevent these conditions. Nonetheless, it is sensible to follow the usual recommendations about a healthy balanced diet and regular exercise. These have been proven to contribute to a healthy digestive tract.

In addition, I would add two pieces of advice:

1. Seek the correct medical advice rather than to assume that nothing can be done. There is no need to suffer in silence. We have made tremendous progress in the last few years in terms of understanding these conditions. There are many new treatment options that are only recently available to patients. These can control symptoms, enhance digestive health, and improve the quality of life.
2. Do not assume that symptoms are due to these common conditions without a proper assessment. Seek out a gastroenterologist to do a proper evaluation and make a precise diagnosis. Each of these conditions even has different variants, each of which is treated differently. A precise diagnosis will help the gastroenterologist to tailor an individualized management plan for each patient. ■



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