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Common Causes of Stomach Ache

By Sally Robertson, BSc

Stomach ache is the term used to describe cramps or a dull ache in the abdomen. Usually, stomach ache is short lived and not a cause for concern. Stomach pain that is severe is more likely to be cause for concern, especially if it occurs unexpectedly and suddenly, in which case it should be treated as a medical emergency.

Whether stomach pain is mild, sharp or felt as cramps, the pain can have various different causes. Some of the most common causes of stomach ache are described below.

Indigestion

Also called dyspepsia, indigestion refers to a full and uncomfortable feeling in the tummy after eating. It may be accompanied by a burning sensation in the upper part of the stomach. Indigestion may be a sign of an underlying issue such as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), gall bladder disease or ulcers and treatment will depend on what the cause is.

Indigestion is a common problem but certain things can mean people are more prone to it. Some further causes include:

- Gastroparesis, a condition where the stomach fails to empty fully. This is a common problem among people who have diabetes.
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Stomach infection
- Pancreatitis
- Thyroid disease
- Stomach cancer, although this is rare

Some medications that may lead to indigestion include:

- Aspirin and other forms of pain relief
- Thyroid medication
- Birth control pills
- Steroids
- Certain antibiotics

Some lifestyle factors that may lead to indigestion include:

- Eating too much, too quickly or while stressed
- Excess alcohol intake
- Stress
- Tiredness
- Smoking

Constipation

Constipation refers to difficult bowel movements or bowel movements that occur less frequently than usual. Constipation is not usually serious. Bowel movements vary between individuals, with some people finding it is normal for them to happen three times a day while others may only have them twice a week. Generally, no bowel movements for more than three days is too long and leads to feces hardening and becoming difficult to pass. Some causes of constipation include the following:

- Dietary changes
- The use of antacids that contain calcium or aluminium
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Inactivity
- Lack of water or fiber
- Pregnancy

- Overuse of laxatives
- Some medications such as antidepressants and iron supplements
- Hypothyroidism
- Stress

Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is a condition where the stomach and intestines become irritated and inflamed, usually as a result of bacterial or viral infection. [Pain in the stomach](#) is usually accompanied by diarrhoea and vomiting and people may also have a fever and headache. Gastroenteritis can be spread in many ways, including the following:

- Contact with someone who has the condition
- Intake of contaminated food or water
- Failing to wash the hands after using the toilet

Gastroenteritis is most commonly caused by a virus, usually norovirus or rotavirus. Norovirus is the most common cause of severe gastroenteritis in the US and rotavirus is the most common cause of gastroenteritis in young children and infants. Gastroenteritis can also be triggered by campylobacter bacteria and salmonella, which are usually spread as a result of undercooking poultry or eggs.

Irritable bowel syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a collection of symptoms that occur together including stomach pain, cramping, bloating, constipation and diarrhea. The condition can cause intestinal damage and have a significant effect on a person's life. The cause of IBS is unknown, but suggested triggers include an overly sensitive immune system or colon. Bacterial infection in the gastrointestinal tract can cause post-infectious IBS.

Food poisoning

Food poisoning occurs as a result of eating toxic, contaminated or spoiled food, which leads to vomiting and diarrhea. Food poisoning is a common problem, with one in six individuals in the US experiencing it every year.

Usually food poisoning is triggered by one of the following three factors:

- Bacteria – Salmonella is the most common cause of serious food poisoning in the US, but other culprits include E.coli, listeria, Campylobacter and C. botulinum.
- Parasites – The most commonly occurring parasite to cause food poisoning is toxoplasma, which is usually found in cat litter boxes. Parasites can go undetected in the intestine for years, but people with weakened immune systems and women who are pregnant are at the greatest risk of serious side effects if parasites make their way into the intestine.
- Viruses – Some of the viruses that cause food poisoning are norovirus, sapovirus, rotavirus and astrovirus, which all bring on similar symptoms.

Sources

- www.webmd.com/pain-management/guide/abdominal-pain-causes-treatments
- <http://www.healthline.com/symptom/abdominal-pain>
- www.nhs.uk/.../Introduction.aspx

Further Reading

- [Using a Pain Diary](#)
- [How Do We Sense Pain?](#)
- [Role of Dopamine in Pain](#)
- [Antidepressants in Pain Management](#)
- [Mechanism of Pain](#)
- [Types of Pain](#)
- [What is the Difference Between Nociceptive and Neuropathic Pain?](#)
- [What is Nociceptive Pain?](#)
- [What is Psychogenic Pain?](#)

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