Coping with Diarrhea and Digestive Distress
Seasonal Digestive Distress: 10 Tips for Coping


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End of summer and early fall is a time for barbecue, seaside clambakes, and fair food. And unless we’re careful, we suffer some unpleasant results: stomachaches, nausea, heartburn, and constipation or diarrhea.

Outdoor events can trigger digestive problems in a number of ways:

- Picnic and party food can spoil in the heat.
- We may over-exercise.
- And it’s easy to become dehydrated.

What can you do? Here, gastroenterologists offer five ways to avoid digestive problems, followed by five ways to deal with digestive trouble once you have it.

5 Ways to Avoid Digestive Problems

1. Eat Smaller, Frequent Meals. If you want to prevent indigestion, eat smaller, more frequent meals, writ gastroenterologist Cynthia M. Yoshida, MD, in her book No More Digestive Problems. In the case of a great picnic or barbecue, try starting with small portions of your favorite foods.

2. Take It Slow. Taste your food, savor it, and space it out. Practice mindful eating, and talk and socialize, says Gerard E. Mullin, MD, associate professor of medicine and director of integrative GI nutrition service at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. “If you overwhelm your stomach -- and the more you eat the more you slo it down -- you’ll feel gas, bloating and discomfort.” Here’s one good way to help yourself slow down: Cut your food into small pieces, then chew each piece well.

Going slow refers to physical activity, too. Mullin suggests that if you exercise for more than 45 minutes, wait an hour before you eat so that the blood diverted to your muscles has time to return to your stomach where it’s needed to help digest your food.

3. Store Food Safely. The waning sun feels great on your skin, but it also allows bacteria to thrive on food. There are about 76 million cases of food-borne illness in the U.S. each year, says the CDC. Common symptoms are diarrhea, vomiting, and other digestive problems. Keep cold foods cold, hot foods hot, and if you have doubts about that salad, steak, or picnic bounty, pass it up. Hot foods should be kept at 140 degrees or warmer. Cold foods should be kept at 40 degrees or colder Perishable food should not be kept at room temperature for longer than two hours.
5 Ways to Avoid Digestive Problems continued...

4. Avoid Fried and Acidic Foods. To prevent gas, bloating, and other symptoms of overindulgence, limit or avoid these types of food:
   • Fatty food, like fried foods and cheese, which take longer to digest and increase risk for heartburn
   • Gassy foods, like sodas and beans
   • Acidic foods, like citrus, tomatoes, colas, tea, and coffee, which can lead to heartburn

5. Hydrate. When it’s warm out, you want to be sure you’re getting enough fluids. Yet you don't want to gulp down glass after glass, which can cause you to swallow air, leading to bloating and gas. Dehydration can lead to constipation and nausea. Drink sensibly before you're thirsty.

5 Tips for Coping with Digestive Problems

You got caught up in the fun and overdid it at the barbecue anyway? Have no fear, it's not hard to handle occasional digestive problems.

1. Eat Fruits and Herbs That Soothe the Stomach. Certain foods can help a troubled digestion, says Mulli who favors pineapple, papaya, ginger tea, and fennel. Other experts also recommend chamomile to soothe stomachs.

2. Drink Clear Liquids. If your digestive problems include diarrhea or vomiting, it's even more important to remain hydrated, though you should take it slow. Drink clear liquids one teaspoon at a time until you can keep them down. Hold off on solid foods for several hours.

If you've got a bad stomachache, severe abdominal pain, or persistent diarrhea or vomiting accompanied fever, see your doctor right away.

3. Avoid Strong Odors. If too much food has made you queasy, you might want to step away from the grill and your favorite aunt who wears all the perfume. Strong odors like cooking smells, perfumes, colognes, a smoke can overturn a queasy stomach.

4. Stay Away from Substances That Irritate Stomachs. Coffee, alcohol, and carbonated beverages can aggravate the digestive system. So can some over-the-counter and prescription medications, as well as some herbal remedies and supplements. If you take medication or supplements and have digestive trouble talk with your doctor.

5. Try Over-the-Counter (OTC) Remedies. Antacids and acid blockers may help relieve occasional indigestion when you've overindulged, while antidiarrheal drugs may help with diarrhea. To be sure you're taking the right medication for your symptoms, talk to your doctor.

"Self-diagnosis and drugs of any kind make a bad combination," writes Steven R. Peikin MD, professor of medicine and head of the division of gastroenterology and liver diseases at Cooper University Hospital, in his book Gastrointestinal Health. Aspirin and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), for example, can make gastrointestinal issues worse for some.

Digestive Problems: When to See a Doctor

Fortunately, stomachaches, diarrhea, constipation, and other digestive problems are usually fleeting.
If you experience digestive trouble often, talk to your health care provider. Your symptoms may be related to a medical condition such as acid reflux, food intolerance, inflammatory bowel disease, irritable bowel syndrome, or ulcers. It may also be related to medications or supplements you are taking.

If you have frequent diarrhea, the CDC recommends seeing your doctor if you've also got:

- High fever (temperature over 101.5 degrees, measured orally)
- Blood in your stool
- Prolonged vomiting that prevents keeping liquids down (which can lead to dehydration)
- Signs of dehydration, including a decrease in urination, a dry mouth and throat, and feeling dizzy when standing up
- Diarrheal illness that lasts more than 3 days

But for most people who have a bit of digestive distress after we overindulge, a little rest, time, and TLC should be all we need to get through occasional barbecue excess.

**SOURCES:**

**Gerard E. Mullin, MD,** associate professor of medicine, director of integrative GI nutrition services, Johns Hopkins Hospital.


**National Institutes of Health,** Medline Plus: "Abdominal Pain." USDA: “Handling Food Safely.”


**WebMD Feature:** "Adventures in Vomiting," "Anxiety, Stress, and Stomachaches."

**KidsHealth.org:** "How to Be Safe When You're in the Sun." Reviewed on April 12, 2010

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**My Notes:**

www.mydigestivehealthcenters.com