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Managing Stomach and Intestinal Problems: Your Guide to Gastrointestinal Relief

Digestive discomfort—whether it takes the form of acid reflux, nausea, cramping, or sudden diarrhea—is one of the most common reasons patients seek medical care. Managing these symptoms effectively depends on targeting the specific area of your gastrointestinal (GI) tract that is irritated.

Upper GI Symptoms: Heartburn, Acid Reflux, and Indigestion

When stomach acid flows backward into the esophagus, it causes a burning sensation (heartburn) or general upper abdominal discomfort.

Non-Prescription Options

- **Antacids (*Gaviscon, Tums, Mylanta*):** Provide immediate, short-term relief by neutralizing existing stomach acid on contact. Perfect for occasional post-meal heartburn.
- **H2 Blockers (*Famotidine / Pepcid AC*):** Reduce the *production* of stomach acid. They take about 15 to 30 minutes to kick in but provide longer-lasting relief (up to 12 hours).
- **Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs) (*Omeprazole / Prilosec OTC*):** Block acid production at the source. These are designed for frequent, chronic heartburn and must be taken daily (usually 30 minutes before your first meal) to be effective.

Prescription Options

If over-the-counter options fail, your health care provider may prescribe prescription-strength PPIs (such as Pantoprazole) or specialized mucosal protectants like Sucralfate, which acts like a physical bandage over irritated stomach linings or ulcers.

Nausea and Vomiting

Nausea is often triggered by viral infections (stomach flu), motion sickness, or food intolerance.

Non-Prescription Options

- **Bismuth Subsalicylate (*Pepto-Bismol*):** Calms general stomach upset and protects the stomach lining. This has been known to work well but be aware that it may turn your stool a very dark color.
- **Natural Remedies:** Ginger supplements, ginger teas, or peppermint oil capsules can significantly soothe a spasming stomach naturally.

Prescription Options

- **Antiemetics (*Ondansetron / Zofran*):** A highly effective prescription medication that dissolves on or under the tongue to rapidly block the nerve signals that trigger the vomiting reflex.
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Lower GI Symptoms: Diarrhea and Cramping

Sudden diarrhea is typically the body's way of flushing out an irritant or infection.

Non-Prescription Options

- **Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS):** Your absolute first line of defense is fluid management. Drink standard electrolyte solutions like Pedialyte or follow a home-made rehydration recipe (water, sugar, and salt) to prevent dangerous dehydration. Sip don't gulp. [Option 1](#) [Option 2](#) [Option 3](#)
- **Anti-Diarrheal (*Loperamide* / *Imodium*):** Slows down intestinal movement to reduce the frequency of bowel movements.
- **Psyllium Fiber Capsules:** When taken regularly, these fiber capsules will help absorb liquid in the intestine and create a better formed stool while decreasing the diarrhea or liquid stools. This one treatment may be very effective for many.

The Diarrhea Warning: Do not use anti-diarrheal medications like Imodium if you have a high fever, bloody stools, or suspect a severe bacterial infection (like *C. difficile*). Slowing down your intestines in these cases traps the bacteria inside your body, making the infection worse.

Medication Avoidance Note: Protect Your Stomach

If you are currently experiencing stomach irritation, nausea, or suspected ulcers, avoid NSAIDs (like Ibuprofen, Advil, or Aleve). As outlined in your [Pain Management Guide](#) in the Recovery Room section of Resources on the Good Health Outcomes Resource guide. NSAIDs block the protective enzymes that shield your stomach lining, which can trigger severe gastric irritation or bleeding. Stick to Acetaminophen (Tylenol) for pain relief instead.

When to Seek Face-to-Face Emergency Care

Gastrointestinal symptoms can occasionally mask serious internal issues. Skip a telehealth visit and go straight to an urgent care or emergency room if you experience:

1. **Inability to Keep Fluids Down:** Vomiting continuously for more than 12–24 hours without being able to hold down sips of water.
2. **Signs of Internal Bleeding:** Vomiting blood (or material that looks like dark coffee grounds) or passing stools that are bloody or maroon/black and tarry.
3. **Severe, Localized Abdominal Pain:** Sharp, excruciating pain, especially if concentrated in the lower right abdomen (a sign of potential appendicitis) or accompanied by a rigid, rock-hard belly.
4. **Signs of Severe Dehydration:** Dizziness upon standing, confusion, or going 8+ hours without urinating.

The above information was reviewed and validated by David Campbell-O'Dell, DNP, APRN-IP, FNP-BC, FAANP