

What's bothering you in the bathroom? The answer can be tricky.



FREAK OUT OR CHILL OUT?

Put your stomach smarts to the test with these digestive dilemmas



We love to talk about eating. Just consider the popularity of cooking shows, diet blogs and Instagram shots of food. But we rarely discuss what happens after we swallow. Because that's when it gets gross, right?

But digestion is a critical part of your health—and a confusing one, too. Gastroenterologist Roshini Rajapaksa, MD, the author of *What the Yuck?! The Freaky and Fabulous Truth About Your Body*, encourages patients to get over their shyness when discussing digestive symptoms.

To get started, she'll help us decode stomach problems with similar symptoms.

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Q You had to rush out of your presentation to book it to the bathroom. You've had a lot of these bouts of diarrhea lately, but sometimes **when you feel the urge to go, nothing happens.**

IS IT: Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)?

IBD. Inflammatory bowel disease, which includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, shares some symptoms with irritable bowel syndrome, including diarrhea and stomach cramping. Unlike IBS, however, IBD can lead to more serious complications and even cancer. A good distinguishing symptom between the two, Rajapaksa says, is feeling a strong urge to go but only passing gas or a small stool. "That's actually a sign there's inflammation in the colon," she says. "It's that swelling that makes you feel like something needs to come out."

Q Lately, your meals never seem to agree with you. After you eat, you often feel a **burning pain in your chest and throat.**

IS IT: Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) or an ulcer?

GERD. People often confuse GERD and ulcer symptoms, but there are key differences. Ulcer pain tends to be gnawing and doesn't travel toward the throat the way the effects of GERD do. GERD's acid can leave you with a sour taste in your mouth and a sore throat. "Generally speaking, ulcers you feel more when you're hungry; acid reflux you feel more after you've eaten," Rajapaksa explains.

Q **You can't go No. 2.** At all. It's been four days, and you're quite uncomfortable. You can pass gas, but that's about it.

IS IT: Constipation or an intestinal obstruction?

CONSTIPATION. The ability to pass gas indicates constipation, which can be relieved with fiber, stool softeners and exercise. An intestinal obstruction prevents even gas from getting through, and nausea, vomiting and a distended abdomen usually accompany the condition. An obstruction is very serious because of the risk of the bowel bursting, potentially causing a life-threatening infection, Rajapaksa says.

Q Your daughter is freaked out by her latest bathroom visit, when she noticed **bright red blood on the toilet paper.** She's frequently constipated, and now she's worried her "insides" are bleeding.

IS IT: An anal fissure or intestinal bleeding?

ANAL FISSURE. Your daughter can calm down. Bright red blood on the toilet paper, rather than dark or tarry blood mixed in with stool, usually has a benign cause. Anal fissures are tiny tears in or around the anus, typically

the result of straining to go. "Look at the bowel habits of your child and start with simple measures like more fiber and prune juice, things that will help them go more smoothly," Rajapaksa says. "Certainly, if it persists, it's a reason to go to the pediatrician."

Q It's your anniversary, and you celebrate with a delicious—and fatty—steak at your favorite restaurant. By bedtime, **you're battling diarrhea that's oily and foul-smelling.** Lately, you've felt sick after meals.

IS IT: Celiac disease or a pancreas problem?

A PANCREAS PROBLEM. Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI) is less known than celiac disease, but both cause digestive distress and nutritional deficiencies. With EPI, your pancreas does not produce the enzymes you need to digest food properly. The symptoms are especially bad after consuming fatty foods, whereas celiac disease sufferers feel the worst after eating gluten, Rajapaksa says. Whatever your symptoms, be patient and cooperate with your doctor's orders while you both determine what's wrong, she says. "When it comes to the GI tract, it's not often clear from day one." ■

PODCAST



Gut Talk

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