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Digestive Disease Specialists Committed to
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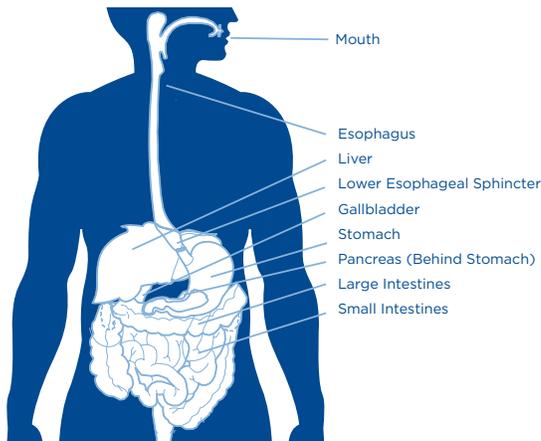
Common Gastrointestinal Problems

CONSTIPATION

Normal Digestive Function

The digestive tract is a continuous tube that breaks food down into nutrients that can be absorbed. Once food enters the stomach, it begins mixing with digestive juices and is passed into the small intestine a little at a time. As the food passes along the small intestine, which is actually over twenty feet long, the nutrients are absorbed through the wall of the intestinal tract and passed into the bloodstream.

By the time the food has reached the large intestine, also called the colon, the nutrients have been removed and waste materials remain. In the colon, the waste material is passed along by a series of muscle contractions, called peristalsis, and eventually the waste reaches the end of the digestive tract, the rectum. The colon absorbs water from the waste material, but if the muscle contractions are not normal, a change in bowel habit can occur.



The digestive tract or gastrointestinal tract

What is a normal bowel habit?

There is a wide variation in normal bowel habits, but the average person will move his or her bowels anywhere from three times a day to three times a week. Anything in this range is therefore considered “normal” — the important thing is what is normal for you.

What is constipation?

Constipation refers to a condition where the bowels move infrequently and the consistency of the stool is often dry and hard. This usually results from excess absorption of water from the stool due to slow passage of the stool in the colon. Answers to certain key questions can help you identify constipation.

- **Has there been any change in diet, exercise habits, lifestyle (daily routine), or stress level?**

Any alteration or deviation from a normal routine may result in an alteration in bowel habits.

- **What medications are being used?**

Certain medications including iron, narcotic analgesics, various anti-hypertensive drugs, and a variety of additional medications can produce constipation.

- **Are there other symptoms?**

People with constipation will often complain of a feeling of abdominal fullness or bloating. They may also experience rectal pressure or discomfort. Gaseousness, abdominal distension, and the feeling of incomplete elimination are also common complaints.

When should I see my doctor?

Medical attention should be considered for any sustained change in bowel habit. Other symptoms which should prompt a visit to the doctor include: weight loss, severe abdominal pain, or rectal bleeding. These symptoms may be a sign of a more serious condition. Several common disorders of the endocrine system may also produce altered bowel habits (for example, diabetes and thyroid disease).

What type of testing should be done?

Your physician will ask you a series of questions to attempt to determine the severity of the problem. A physical examination will be performed. Laboratory testing is often done. Your doctor may recommend x-rays of your colon (a test called a barium enema) or may advise endoscopic tests.