



Gastrointestinal (Gut) function/ symptoms and eating disorders

Why is our gut so important?

- Our gut helps us to digest the food that we eat. It also supports production of the energy we need to complete our day to day activities.
- More recent research has also shown our gut is home to millions of helpful bacteria. A good balance of these bacteria helps to support digestive processes, and our immune system, brain function and mood.

What body parts make up the gut?

1) the mouth and oesophagus

- Chewing food is the first part of our digestive process.
- Our saliva coats food so it is easy to swallow and then our food moves to our stomach.

2) The stomach

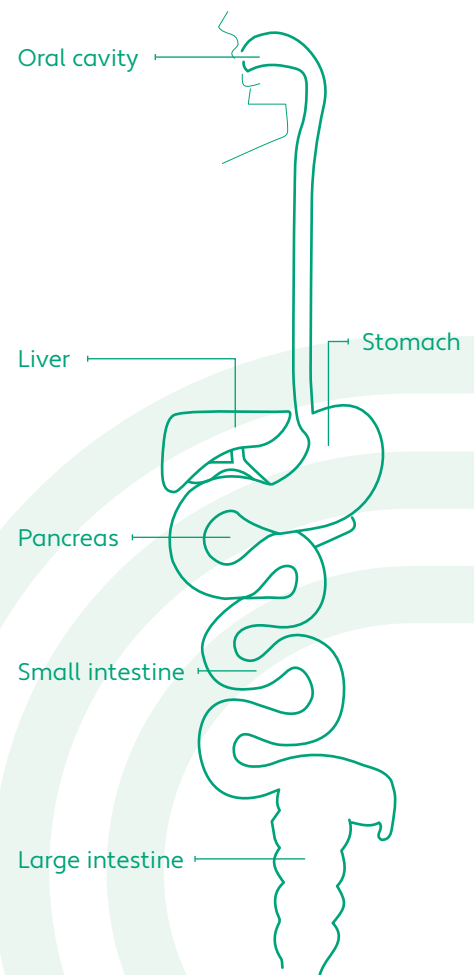
- Food is first broken down into smaller particles by stomach juices consisting of acid and enzymes. Mucus acts here as a protective stomach layer.
- The mix of broken down food and juices then move into the small intestine.

3) Small intestine

- It is here where food gets broken down into the smallest parts. In the middle and lower part of our small intestine, nutrients are absorbed into our bloodstream and can travel via the bloodstream to the cells of our body.

4) The liver and pancreas

- Our liver makes a liquid called bile and its main job is to break down fat in the small intestine.
- Our pancreas makes and releases enzymes into the small intestine to aid in the breakdown of food.



5) The large intestine

- The rest of the unabsorbed nutrients and juices (mainly fibre and water) travel into the large intestine.
- Water and minerals are re-absorbed back into the body while the rest (waste) is stored in our bowels until we are ready to go to the toilet.

Why might individuals with eating disorders report gut symptoms?

When we are not eating enough food due to an eating disorder this can impact our gut and we can experience gut symptoms (below). The eating disorder symptoms include: short or long term food restriction, vomiting and/or laxative use. Individuals may also experience weight loss.

Common gut symptoms may include:

- Abdominal distention/ bloating
- Gas (wind)/ flatulence
- Pain
- Reflux/ heartburn
- Diarrhoea
- Fullness after eating even very small amounts
- Constipation

What causes gut symptoms?

- Muscle wastage (atrophy) across our gut (including the stomach, and the small and large intestines) due to underuse. This results in food taking longer to travel through our digestive tract known as delayed gastric emptying and causes stomach pain, bloating and wind/ gas.
- Decrease in hormones and enzymes that support digestion.
- Decrease in the amount of helpful gut bacteria that support digestion.
- The state our central nervous system is in at the time of eating, can also impact gut function. A history of trauma and/or comorbid psychiatric conditions can adversely affect digestion.

How can we support gut symptoms for long term health?

It is important to know that in many cases gut symptoms will reduce when you begin to eat regularly and adequately and reduce behaviours interfering with digestion.

Please note: Abdominal bloating, and pain are often misinterpreted as a larger stomach or “fat” stomach, which may further discourage someone with an eating disorder from eating regularly and enough. It is therefore important to be guided by your Eating Disorder dietitian and/or meal plan in this instance. Your body needs to heal with regular and adequate nutrition.

While it is normal to expect some gut symptoms during the healing process in the short term, research has shown that individuals may find some relief from the following:

- Using a heat pack or water bottle on your stomach.
- Wearing loose clothing.
- Using mindfulness or gut directed hypnotherapy phone apps or resources.
- Engaging in meaningful activities post meals to distract from symptoms.

If you are worried about your gut symptoms we encourage you to consult your eating disorder dietitian and/or seek professional medical advice.

Reference:

Santonicola A, Gagliardi M, Guarino MPL, Siniscalchi M, Ciacci C, Lovino P. Eating Disorders and Gastrointestinal Diseases. *Nutrients*. 2019; 11(12):3038.