

Education

Abdominal Pain

What is abdominal pain?

Abdominal pain is aching or cramping in your belly. The abdomen, or belly, is the area between the chest and the pelvis. The pain can range from mild discomfort to cramping or severe pain.

What causes abdominal cramps?

Many things can cause abdominal pain and it can sometimes be hard to know the exact cause of the pain. Examples of some of the causes of pain in the abdomen are:

- indigestion or heartburn
- stomach flu
- food poisoning
- food allergy
- stress and anxiety
- gastritis (an irritation of the stomach lining)
- constipation
- menstruation
- ulcers
- hernia
- urinary tract infection
- muscle strain
- disease or infection in the uterus
- pregnancy, childbirth, and changing hormone levels during breast-feeding.

Sometimes abdominal pain is caused by a problem in another part of the body, such as the lungs or the heart. For example, a heart attack can cause upper abdominal pain.

You cannot always tell how serious the cause is from the severity of the pain. Mild conditions such as gas or stomach flu may cause severe pain, while more serious problems such as cancer may cause relatively mild pain.

How is it treated?

The treatment depends on the cause of the pain. Often there are simple things you can do to feel better:

- Put a heating pad set at low or a covered hot water bottle on your belly.
- Take a warm bath.
- If the cramps may be stress-related, relaxation techniques may help.
- If you also have gas and bloating, it may be relieved with nonprescription medicine that contains simethicone.
- Antacids may help to relieve indigestion, heartburn, and nausea.
- Nonprescription pain relievers such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen can help relieve menstrual pain, but aspirin and ibuprofen can make an upset stomach worse.

If you go to your health care provider's office for treatment, your provider will examine you, review your medical history, and ask for details about the pain and other symptoms. You may have some tests. Your treatment will depend on your provider's diagnosis.

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your provider if you have:

- constant severe pain

- pain that comes and goes
- pain that is getting worse
- pain with shortness of breath
- pain with bloody vomit or bloody bowel movements.

Call 911 right away if you have abdominal pain along with jaw, arm, shoulder, chest, or back pain; sweating; nausea; shortness of breath; or anxiety. These symptoms may mean you are having a heart attack.

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