

# Functional Abdominal Pain

## How to help with your child's chronic abdominal pain

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### **What is functional abdominal pain?**

If your otherwise-healthy child or teen complains of abdominal pain for two months or more, they likely have what is called functional abdominal pain. Types of functional abdominal pain can include abdominal migraines, dyspepsia and irritable bowel syndrome or IBS.

The term “functional” means there is no blockage, disease or infection causing the pain. In some children, it's due to the nerves in the digestive organs. The nerves in these organs can become very sensitive and cause pain even during normal functions, like when food is moving through the intestines. The pain can cause your child to cry, get red-faced or pale, double over or break into a sweat. Other members of your family may have a history of the same problem.

Because of the pain, your child or teen may miss a lot of school or stop their play and avoid social activities. It is good to know that even if your child continues to have some pain, you can expect normal growth and general good health to continue.

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### **How common is functional abdominal pain?**

Functional abdominal pain is very common. Between 25 to 30% of all school-aged children have episodes of abdominal pain that comes and goes. About half of these children will go seek medical care. The other half has pain, but do not seek medical treatment and it gets better on its own.

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### **Can treatment eliminate the pain?**

Treatment centers on managing the pain and making healthy lifestyle choices. While you can expect your child or teen's pain to improve and for them to return to normal activities in life, their pain might not go completely away.

We will work with you to find your child's triggers and manage their pain. We will help them learn not to focus on the pain and to get back to doing their normal activities. It is important to prevent the pain from becoming the center of your child's and family's life and to encourage them to do the things they enjoy.

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### **What triggers this abdominal pain?**

Many different things that can cause or worsen abdominal pain. Here is a list of different triggers and some of the things that you and your child or teen can do about them.

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#### **To Learn More**

- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [seattlechildrens.org](http://seattlechildrens.org)

#### **Free Interpreter Services**

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

### Triggers of Stomach Pain

Trigger	Reason	Ways to help
<b>Stress</b>	Feeling stress or anxiety can cause stomach pain. It can happen while feeling stress, or afterwards.	Learn ways to manage stress: biofeedback, acupuncture, massage, exercise, deep breathing, yoga, cognitive behavioral therapy or counseling.
<b>Constipation</b>	Abnormal stooling patterns can cause cramping or irritate nerves in the digestive organs, causing or worsening stomach pain.	Increase fiber, and drink plenty of water. With guidance of healthcare provider, sometimes stool softeners and stimulant laxatives are used. Aim for daily soft, mashed-potato-consistency stools.
<b>Lactose intolerance</b>	Some children or teens have a hard time breaking down dairy products, which can lead to abdominal pain.	Avoid dairy products, or take lactase pills.
<b>Sugar</b>	Some bodies have a hard time breaking down and absorbing even small amounts of fructose. Fructose is a type of sugar found in fruits, vegetables, honey, and processed foods and beverages.	Start by avoiding foods high in sugars, specifically those containing high fructose corn syrup; and beverages such as juice drinks, sodas and 100% fruit juices.
<b>Depression</b>	Feeling sad frequently can cause or worsen stomach pain.	Seek counseling. Ask healthcare provider for medications that may help.
<b>Bacteria or virus</b>	Illnesses can change the bacterial balance in the gut, making abdominal nerves more sensitive. This can cause stomach pain or cause increased water demands on the body, which then can lead to constipation.	Ensure child or teen is well hydrated, and treat symptoms of constipation.
<b>Lack of water</b>	Not drinking enough water can lead to constipation causing stomach pain.	Drink enough water so that urine is clear or very light yellowish in color (generally around 6 to 8 glasses a day). May need to drink more when the weather is hot or during exercise.
<b>Travel</b>	Being away from home can influence a lot of things that might trigger abdominal pain. It can often disrupt regular eating and sleeping patterns and can cause stress.	Plan ahead, have snacks and food available. Drink plenty of fluids.
<b>Irregular sleep</b>	Sleeping too little or too much	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Go to bed and get up at the same time each day.</li><li>• Plan to get 8 to 10 hours of sleep each night.</li><li>• Take computer and TV out of bedroom or at least turn them off, including cell phones.</li><li>• Sleep the same amount each night. Avoid sleeping more on weekends and less during the week.</li></ul>
<b>Poor exercise habits</b>	Exercising too much or not enough	Exercise 3 to 4 times a week to help lessen stress and keep in shape. Moderate exercise, like walking, running, biking, or other kinds of activities like these that you enjoy are best.

### Ways to manage abdominal pain without medicine

Pain medicines are usually not helpful or needed. There are many other ways to manage abdominal pain. Dealing with stress, diet and other life style changes or simple measures such as a hot pack on the belly or warm bath may help. There are many ways to deal with stress, like meditation or yoga, massage, writing in a journal or going to counseling. Often using more than one technique is helpful.

### Simple things to try at home first

- **Applying warmth.** Soaking in a hot bath or using warm packs on your belly can help relax tense muscles.
- **Diet changes** such as decreasing fructose, lactose or other sugars can be helpful. Eating a well-balanced diet based on whole foods rather than processed or fast foods can also help.
- **Keeping a diary** to record symptom flare-up, and to identify triggers (like emotions, health habits or foods) then try to limit those triggers.
- **Keeping a regular daily schedule.** Make sure your child or teen keeps going to school, doing hobbies and daily activities. Keeping a routine is good, but it is also important for them not to try to do too much. Include moderate exercise regularly.
- **Avoiding constipation.** Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables and keeping hydrated by drinking enough liquids will help prevent constipation and keep bowels regular. A sign that your child is getting enough liquids is when they have clear or very pale yellow urine versus dark yellow.
- **Distraction.** Try things to distract your child's attention during a painful episode. Talk your child through the pain, use music, books, deep breathing or movement, like taking a walk. All these efforts help take their mind away from the pain.

### Therapies that can help

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy.** This is counseling that teaches your child about the connection between their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. It teaches how to change thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors to control pain and stress.
- **Biofeedback.** A kind of treatment for older children and teens that uses sensors on the body and a computer to track data about muscle activity, heart rate and breathing. Your child can learn when abdominal pain is coming on, and what they can do to relax before it becomes a problem.

### Alternative and complementary medicine

These are healing treatments that are not part of conventional Western medicine. They can include therapies such as acupuncture, massage therapy or herbal medicine(s).

### **Treating abdominal pain with medicine or herbal remedies**

Sometimes, abdominal pain can be relieved with medicines as part of the treatment plan. Ask your child's or teen's healthcare provider about these treatment options.

- Acid reduction therapy
- Antibiotics
- Antidepressants
- Antispasmodics agents
- Peppermint oil
- Probiotics
- Stool softeners and stimulant laxatives when home measures aren't enough to improve constipation

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### **Call your healthcare provider if your child or teen has any of these signs:**

- Weight loss that is not on purpose
- Blood loss seen in their stool or vomit.
- Ongoing vomiting or diarrhea
- Ongoing right-sided abdominal pain, either upper or lower.
- Unexplained fever (over 101.5 degrees F)
- Family history of inflammatory bowel disease