

I have indigestion

Introduction

Many aspects of your life can be affected after being critically ill, and this includes how your body feels and how you are eating. It may be that you find eating more difficult than before and you may feel worried or low because of your difficulties.

Often, these problems get better as you get stronger, but you may need some help or advice while this is happening. This information sheet looks at common problems around eating after critical illness and gives you tips about what may help.

This information forms part of advice on 'Nutrition and recovery after critical illness', and is a sub-section of the '[Tips to help with eating problems after Critical illness](#)' leaflet. Also see the '[Nutrition when at home](#)' and '[Nutrition in the hospital](#)' information. Nutrition is the term used to describe what you eat or drink to give you energy and other nutrients to help your body recover and stay healthy.

Having this information may help you to understand more about nutrition, how it can help your recovery and overcome any difficulties with eating after your critical illness. We hope it will help you and your family, but if you have any particular nutritional questions or worries, please ask your doctor for help or see if they can refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian is a registered health care professional who advises about nutrition for health and during illness.

You can check how healthy your current weight is for your height on the NHS website¹. There are also very good self-screening tools to use to check whether you should be worried about how your low weight or poor eating may affect your health from the Patients Association² and BAPEN³.

If you have ongoing difficulties with eating, even after this advice, if you have a low weight or are continuing to lose weight or strength, do speak to your doctor or ask to see a dietitian.

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/>

² <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=3449fca0-dc52-4f06-ac75-3050b71d7bb5>

³ <https://www.malnutritionselfscreening.org/>

I have indigestion

It is normal for your stomach to produce acid, but sometimes this acid can hurt your gullet (oesophagus), lining of your stomach, or top part of your bowel (duodenum). This is called indigestion or heartburn and causes pain or discomfort in your stomach or a burning pain behind your breastbone. You might have both these symptoms, or only one, and they may happen just after eating or drinking.

Other symptoms of indigestion can be:

- feeling full or bloated
- feeling sick (nausea)
- burping
- bringing up (regurgitating) fluid or food into higher up your stomach (the oesophagus).

Why do I have indigestion?

Indigestion can be caused by different things such as:

- some medicines (e.g. aspirin or ibuprofen)
- stress or anxiety
- physical changes, such as a hiatus hernia, stomach ulcer or reflux disease
- infections (such as *Helicobacter pylori* – a bacteria usually found in the stomach)
- smoking
- alcohol
- being overweight.

It is common to have indigestion after a critical illness because of the medications you may have had or just because our bodies have been through a lot of stress.

What can I do to help my indigestion?

There are different things which could help your indigestion including some of the following lifestyle changes:

- eat 'little and often' and stop eating before you feel full
- try to sit down during and after eating or drinking
- don't wear tight fitting clothes around your stomach, for example tight trousers or belts
- avoid eating large meals 2-3 hours before sleeping if you find your indigestion is worse at night or when lying down
- sleep propped up with a pillow
- cut down or stop smoking and having alcohol, especially around mealtimes. Please see your nurse or doctor if you need support or advice to help you with this
- keep a diary for a few days when you have indigestion. This will help you to see if specific foods, drinks or eating patterns are causing you a problem
- losing weight if you are overweight, because extra weight around your stomach can put pressure on it and cause indigestion. A healthy, balanced diet combined with regular exercise may help you to achieve gradual weight loss. For more guidance on losing weight during recovery, see the 'Healthy eating advice for life after critical illness of the 'Nutrition at home after critical illness' leaflet.

What foods or drinks may make indigestion worse?

Although it is difficult to give tips that will help everyone, some people with indigestion often say that some foods or drinks sometimes make indigestion worse, such as:

- rich or fatty foods – which may take longer to digest
- spicy foods and caffeine – which may irritate your stomach lining
- fizzy drinks– which may increase pressure in your stomach, causing acid to rise up.

What medicines may help?

Treatment will depend on the likely cause of your indigestion. You can ask your pharmacist for medicines that might help you (such as heartburn relief liquid or tablets). If symptoms carry on, speak to your doctor who may ask you to have some tests to check the cause, or who may give you medicine to protect your stomach lining and reduce symptoms.

Summary

Any indigestion you have after your critical illness should settle in time, but choosing certain foods and drinks fluids, as well as how and when you have them, could help the symptoms of indigestion.

More information:

NHS UK advice on:

- Indigestion <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/indigestion/>

See ICUsteps information for more information <https://icusteps.org/information>

This information sheet forms part of the wider Tips to help with eating problems after critical illness: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/tips-to-help-with-eating-problems-after-critical-illness.html>

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