

DIGESTIVE HEALTHCARE OF GEORGIA

Patient Education: Abdominal Bloating

What it is, how it's evaluated, treatment options, and what to do next

What is abdominal bloating?

Bloating is a feeling of fullness, pressure, or swelling in the abdomen. Some people also notice their belly looks larger than usual; this visible increase in size is called **distention**. Bloating and distention can occur together, but they are not the same thing. Bloating is common and may happen around meals, but frequent, persistent, worsening, or disruptive symptoms deserve medical attention. [1, 2]

Bloating is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Common contributors include swallowed air, gas produced as gut bacteria digest certain carbohydrates, constipation, food intolerances, and disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or functional dyspepsia. Less commonly, a digestive or other health condition may be responsible. [2]

What symptoms might happen with bloating?

You may notice:

- A feeling of fullness, pressure, or swelling in your belly
- Your abdomen appearing larger than usual
- Passing gas or belching
- Abdominal discomfort or pain
- Changes in bowel habits, such as constipation or diarrhea

Symptoms may change during the day or after eating. Keeping track of when they occur can help your clinician look for patterns. [1, 2]

How is bloating evaluated?

Your clinician will ask about your symptoms, when they began, how often they occur, their relationship to meals and bowel movements, and whether you have other symptoms. They may ask about your health history, family history, medicines and supplements, and eating habits. A physical examination may also be performed. [2, 3]

Testing depends on your history and examination. **Many people with bloating do not need extensive testing**, but a clinician may order tests if symptoms or other findings suggest a specific cause. Possible tests include:

- **Blood tests** to look for signs of anemia, inflammation, or certain conditions.
- **Stool tests** when infection, intestinal inflammation, or another stool-related issue is suspected.
- **Breath tests** in selected cases to evaluate possible difficulty digesting certain sugars or other suspected causes.

- **Imaging or endoscopy** if your symptoms, examination, or medical history suggest a structural or other digestive problem. [2, 3]

Tell your clinician if you have had prior abdominal surgery, significant changes in bowel habits, a family history of digestive disease, or unintentional weight loss.

How is bloating treated?

Treatment depends on the cause. There is no single treatment that works for everyone. Your clinician may suggest one or more of the following: [2, 4]

Eating and drinking habits

- Eat more slowly and consider smaller meals.
- Limit fizzy drinks, chewing gum, and habits that lead to swallowing extra air if they seem to trigger symptoms.
- Keep a food-and-symptom diary to help identify possible patterns.
- Avoid eliminating many foods without guidance. A registered dietitian or clinician can help determine whether a targeted diet change is appropriate.

Constipation or bowel-habit changes

- If constipation is contributing, your clinician may recommend a plan to improve bowel regularity. Ask before starting a laxative or fiber supplement, especially if symptoms are new or severe.

Food intolerance or a digestive condition

- If a food intolerance or condition such as IBS is suspected, treatment may include a supervised dietary approach or condition-specific care.
- A low-FODMAP diet may help some people with IBS-related symptoms, but it can be restrictive and is best undertaken with guidance from a clinician or dietitian.

Medicines or supplements

- Depending on the likely cause and your health history, your clinician may recommend a medicine or supplement. Check with your clinician or pharmacist before using products for bloating, particularly if you take other medicines, are pregnant, or have a chronic health condition.

What are the next steps?

1. **Make an appointment** if bloating is frequent, persistent, worsening, or affecting your daily activities—or if you have other digestive symptoms.
2. **Keep a brief symptom diary.** Record when bloating occurs, foods and drinks, bowel movements, pain, and any medicines or supplements.
3. **Bring a current medication list** and information about prior tests, surgeries, and relevant family history.
4. **Ask your clinician:** What causes are most likely? Do I need tests? Could constipation or a food intolerance be involved? What treatment should I try, and when should we follow up?
5. **Follow the agreed plan** and contact your clinician if symptoms do not improve or change.

When to seek medical care

Contact a healthcare professional promptly for persistent or worsening bloating, or bloating along with unintentional weight loss, blood in your stool, ongoing vomiting, or a noticeable abdominal lump or swelling. [2, 5]

Seek emergency care now for sudden, severe abdominal pain; a rigid or very tender abdomen; vomiting blood or material that looks like coffee grounds; black, tarry or heavy bloody stools; fainting or confusion; difficulty breathing; or inability to pass stool or gas—especially if you are vomiting. Call 911 for a medical emergency. [5]

Set up an appointment

Call Digestive Healthcare of Georgia to schedule an appointment with a provider. The practice lists these office numbers: [6]

- **Atlanta:** (404) 355-3200
- **Cartersville or Jasper:** (706) 253-7340
- **Fayetteville:** (770) 719-3240
- **Newnan:** (678) 326-4812
- **Ellijay:** (706) 253-5514
- **Woodstock or Marietta:** (404) 425-5570

Call to confirm the appropriate office and appointment availability. The practice lists appointments by arrangement. For emergency symptoms, call 911 or go to an emergency department instead of waiting for an office appointment.

Sources

[1] National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). *Symptoms & Causes of Gas in the Digestive Tract*.

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/gas-digestive-tract/symptoms-causes>

[2] NIDDK. *Gas in the Digestive Tract*.

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/gas-digestive-tract>

[3] NIDDK. *Diagnosis of Indigestion*.

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/indigestion-dyspepsia/diagnosis>

[4] American College of Gastroenterology (ACG). *Belching, Bloating & Flatulence*.

<https://gi.org/topics/belching-bloating-and-flatulence/>

[5] MedlinePlus. *Abdominal Pain*.

<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003120.htm>

[6] Digestive Healthcare of Georgia. *Contacts & Locations*.

<https://digestivehealthcare.net/contact-locations/>

This handout is for general education and does not replace medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Your provider can recommend care based on your symptoms, test results, and health history.