

# Functional abdominal (tummy) pain disorders

## Functional abdominal pain disorders

Abdominal pain is one of the most common health complaints in children. The most common cause for this type of pain are functional abdominal pain disorders, which affect about 15 out of 100 (15%) of children across the world.

Functional abdominal pain disorders include:

- Indigestion (functional dyspepsia)
- irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- abdominal migraine (similar symptoms to a regular migraine, but no headache)
- non-specified functional abdominal pain

Other gastrointestinal (tummy and bowel) symptoms such as being sick (vomiting), constipation and diarrhoea are also common with functional abdominal pain. Children with functional abdominal pain can also get other pains in their body, such as headaches.

Abdominal pain in a child can lead to increased anxiety and can affect family life, school life and a child's daily activities. However, children with functional abdominal pain disorders tend to be otherwise healthy and develop as normal.

## Causes

The gut is what we call the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. This starts at your mouth and includes your food pipe, stomach, large and small intestines (bowel), all the way down to your bottom.

It is important to understand that functional abdominal pain disorders are not caused by inflammation, infection or a structural abnormality in the gut. The pain is not caused by a problem with the body itself, but with how the body is functioning. There is a problem with how the brain and the gut are working together

When the muscles and nerves in our gut are not working in a coordinated way, it can change the speed and smoothness of movements in the gut.

For some people the nerves between the gut and the brain can become oversensitive. This can lead to the brain noticing sensations it would usually ignore. These sensations can be unpleasant or painful. This process is known as visceral hypersensitivity.

Research is looking at how the bacteria that live in our gut can cause gastrointestinal symptoms. Evidence shows that the type, and diversity of bacteria in our gut can affect functional abdominal pain disorders, but this research is in its early stages.

These symptoms can be distressing and cause considerable pain, but it is important to know that they are not dangerous, and will not lead to long-term damage to your child. It is also important to understand that the pain is real, and is not made up or imagined.

There are things that can increase the chance of a child getting a functional abdominal pain disorder.

- A family history of similar disorders, such as IBS.
- Our bodies' natural ('fight or flight') response to stress and anxiety can affect the gut, such as making it work faster or slower. These changes can make the pain worse. For examples of stress for a child see the 'Stress' section on page 7. include:

You might have noticed that your child's symptoms get worse when they are more stressed, or after another illness. It is worth noting that children who have chronic (long-term) stress are often not aware that they are stressed.

Some children who have had difficulties growing up, such as a trauma, adversity, or bereavement, are also more likely to get a functional abdominal pain disorder later on in life.

- Other psychological difficulties, such as depression, can increase the risk of functional abdominal pain disorders.
- Food allergies and intolerances do not necessarily cause functional abdominal pain disorders, but might trigger symptoms in some children.

## Tests to confirm the diagnosis

Some people think that a diagnosis of a functional abdominal pain disorder means that the doctors cannot find what is wrong with their child. This is not true. Some conditions, such as coeliac disease and inflammatory bowel disease, have some of the same symptoms, so your doctor might decide to do some tests to check for these. Generally, doctors can make a diagnosis from listening to your child's symptoms.

## Treatment options

For some young people these symptoms can improve over time. The goal of any treatment is to ease symptoms and help your child get back to their usual daily activities.

There is no 'cure' for functional abdominal pain as there is no physical damage to treat. There are some things that can make life more manageable for your child.

Medicine might be suggested to treat the symptoms. Your doctor will talk to you about this and will prescribe medicine if needed. This might include:

- laxatives (to make them poo)
- antidiarrheal (to stop them pooing)
- antispasmodic drugs (to stop cramps)
- probiotics (to put good bacteria into your child's gut)

You can also buy peppermint oil capsules at your local pharmacy which can help ease abdominal pain. Medicines that work on the communication between the brain and gut, such as antidepressants, might help improve symptoms for some people.

## Helping your child manage their condition

There are some things you can do to help your child cope with their functional abdominal pain.

### Diet

We recommend that all children eat a healthy, balanced diet as we know this is good for gut health. You might have to try different changes to your child's diet and lifestyle before finding out what works best. For general dietary advice visit [web](http://www.nhs.uk/change4life) [www.nhs.uk/change4life](http://www.nhs.uk/change4life)

## **Reassurance and relaxation**

As these disorders are caused by oversensitive brain-gut communication, getting your child to develop their own relaxation strategies can help to calm the body and reduce symptoms.

Children often worry that their pain is a sign that there is something seriously wrong, so make sure they understand what functional abdominal pain is.

It can be helpful to explain to your child that their body is bit like an oversensitive car alarm, and their body is sending their brain pain signals at the slightest movement, like a car alarm going off in the wind. This can help to reassure them that their symptoms are not causing serious damage to their body.

Diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation are two relaxation strategies that might help. For more information on these see our information, **Relaxation for your child.**

Mindfulness and yoga have also been shown to help some children with functional abdominal pain disorders.

## **Activity**

Regular physical exercise can ease symptoms, by improving bowel function and helping to lower general stress levels. For information on how to improve your child's activity levels, visit [web www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/)

## **Mental health**

If your child suffers from any mental health conditions, such as anxiety or depression, getting help to overcome these will be important.

## **Sleep**

Poor sleep can make symptoms worse. If sleep is an issue for your child, try to help them improve their sleep patterns. For information on how to improve your child's sleep habits, visit [web www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/healthy-sleep-tips-for-children/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/healthy-sleep-tips-for-children/)

## **Stress**

It is important to find anything that might be causing stress for your child and help them to overcome these. Common examples of stress in children include:

- exams, general performance, or bullying at school
- friendships
- family worries or changes in home life
- appearance
- illness in the family

Talk with your child and help them to come up with strategies to manage any worries that they have. You might need the support of your child's school to manage any bullying or academic stress they are experiencing.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to the doctor or nurse caring for your child.

For more information on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **web:** [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets)

## Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS),

**phone** 020 7188 8801 **email** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

To make a complaint contact the complaints department

**phone** 020 7188 3514 **email** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

## Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please

get in touch, **phone** 020 7188 8815

**email** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

## NHS 111

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day,

**phone** 111 **web** [www.111.nhs.uk](http://www.111.nhs.uk)

**Leaflet number: 5271/VER1**

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