

Gastrointestinal Problems in Eating Disorders

Gastrointestinal (GI) problems are one of the most common consequences of an eating disorder. Individuals with Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and other eating disorders experience a number of GI changes which are believed to be caused by starvation, malnutrition, and the underuse of the GI tract.

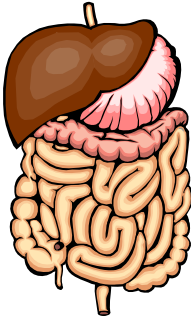
GI problems experienced by people with an eating disorder include:

- Bloating
- Constipation
- Diarrhoea
- Flatulence
- Abdominal pain
- Fullness after eating even very small amounts

Why do people with eating disorders suffer from gastrointestinal problems?

Chronic restriction can cause the muscles of the small and large intestine to atrophy, or waste away, due to underuse. This results in food taking longer to travel through our digestive tract, known as delayed gastric emptying, and causes stomach aches, bloating and wind. When the body is in starvation mode, fewer enzymes and hormones required to promote digestion are produced, therefore slowing down the process of digestion further. Normal digestion through a healthy intestinal tract takes around 1.5 hours, however in an undernourished body, this can take up to 5 hours. Frequent vomiting can also interfere with GI functioning and contribute to slow digestion as the rhythm and process of digestion is interrupted by the act of vomiting. Inadequate and irregular food intake also affects bowel functioning. The bowel requires an adequate amount of waste to be in it in order to empty. With limited intake, the bowel does not function effectively or regularly and it may be many days between bowel movements.

GI problems can also be caused by a diet low in the nutrients needed for a healthy intestinal tract, including fibre and water.



A consequence of slow, inefficient digestion and poor bowel functioning is that people recovering from eating disorders experience significant GI distress. Bloating, constipation and pain are often misinterpreted as fullness of the stomach, which discourages them from eating. This makes the process of renourishment even more physically and psychologically challenging.



The misuse of laxatives can also cause GI problems. Laxatives disrupt normal bowel function and can cause symptoms such as: loss of intestinal muscle tone, bloating, gas, colicky pain, appearance of mucus and blood in the stool, incontinence of faeces, and in severe cases, paralysis of the bowel. See our handout titled *Laxative Misuse*. In most people, these symptoms are reversible after stopping laxatives, but some permanent effects may occur. **It is important that you do not self-medicate with laxatives for the relief of constipation.** Continuing to take laxatives to relieve various GI symptoms is in fact maintaining these symptoms as our digestive system does not get the opportunity to build up strength to digest food on its own.

Treating Gastrointestinal Problems

GI problems will improve when food intake and behaviours interfering with digestion are normalised. If you are working towards increasing the frequency, quantity, and/or variety of food you are eating, it is normal to expect some GI discomfort in the short-term. This does not mean you have eaten too much and is a normal part of the recovery journey for many people. Some people find it helpful to alleviate this discomfort by using a hot water bottle or engaging in a distracting activity after eating. It may take some time for the system to recover normal functioning. If you are concerned about GI problems it is important you seek professional medical advice.

