

## Mail Today

### Are you plagued by frequent stomach aches or a burning sensation after your meals? Both signal a digestive problem

BY SASWATI SARKAR

**I**NDIGESTION may signal a far more serious ailment than you had ever imagined and can even ruin many a precious moment in your life. It may take away the joy from a long anticipated dinner with a loved one, for example. This is what happened with Sagarika Chauhan, a call centre employee. "I was out with my fiancé for dinner. Everything was fine except for a few odd burps and a slight burning sensation around my tummy," she says.

The real problem arose half an hour after dinner when she experienced a shooting pain in her tummy coupled with a feeling of nausea. "It took me two to three shots of Eno's, a strong antacid, lots of water and almost an hour to get rid of the pain and nauseous feeling. The embarrassment took longer to recover from," admits Sagarika.

Sagarika is not alone. Digestive problems are hitting almost all and sundry, owing to today's fast-paced life. A burning sensation in the stomach or upper abdomen, heartburn (a burning sensation just under the breastbone that sometimes radiates to the neck), abdominal pain, bloating (a premature feeling of fullness after meals), belching and gas, nausea, acidic taste, weight loss, diarrhea and sometimes even constipation are some of these. When the digestive system fails to function properly, our body does not receive the valuable nutrients necessary for it to function properly. Consequently, this malabsorption of nutrients can lead to energy and sometimes even weight loss.

#### Digestion is a complex process

Digestion begins in the mouth, the moment you put food in, chew or swallow, and is completed in the large intestine. Each mouthful of food takes about six seconds to reach the stomach once swallowed. "The food is mechanically broken and churned further in the stomach. It mixes with the digestive juices, acids and enzymes produced by the stomach," explains Dr Vivek Raj, senior consultant gastroenterologist, Max Hospital. Any glitch in this complex procedure gives rise to various symptoms of indigestion.

For example, acid production by the stomach might just shoot up leading to a burning sensation or an irregular muscle movement of the stomach resulting in a premature feeling of fullness. "If the muscle movement of the stomach and intestine are slower than normal, then both these organs take longer time to empty themselves. This in turn makes you feel full all the time," explains Colonel SK Thakur, senior gastroenterologist, Sitaram Bhartiya Institute of Science & Research.

#### Medical conditions may interfere

A myriad of factors, from medical conditions to lifestyle issues are responsible for digestive problems. Various medical conditions like gastritis (inflammation of the stomach), ulcers, infection in the esophagus, and bacterial growth in the intestine, gallstones and pancreatic disease give rise to indigestion. Sometimes a completely unrelated problem may be the cause. "I had a sore throat for three to four months and went to an ENT specialist who diagnosed it as a digestive problem," says 38-year-old graphic designer Praveen Bagga. Praveen was actually suffering from Gastro-Esophageal Reflux Disease (GERD), another major trigger for indigestion. In GERD, the stomach acid rises the "wrong way" up the esophagus and sometimes into the mouth. "This keeps the throat lining moist and encourages bacteria to thrive. Thus you get a sore throat," elaborates Dr Sudeep Khanna, senior consultant

gastroenterologist, Pushpawati Singhania Research Institute for Liver, Renal and Digestive Diseases.

#### Lifestyle is the problem

Medical reasons apart, indigestion may be triggered by various lifestyle factors like stress, smoking, alcoholism and the likes. For IT professional Shekhar Sharma, stress was the culprit. "I was diagnosed with stress-induced gastritis," he says. Increased stress shot

up the acid production in his stomach which in turn led to a burning pain. When the brain feels severely stressed, it unleashes a cascade of hormones that can create uproar in the digestive system.

In addition to stress, smoking is another lifestyle habit that may lead to gastritis. "Smoke actually releases pro-inflammatory chemicals which, in severe cases, might turn into ulcer as well," alerts Dr Khanna.

#### Rev up the process

Since poor digestion or indigestion is a symptom rather than a disease, treatment usually depends upon the underlying condition causing the indigestion. Besides treating the specific cause, doctors prescribe antacids to relieve symptoms. However, antacids should not be had over a long period of time. As they bring down the stomach's acid production significantly, your body is not able to optimally digest food and

# TUMMY TROUBLES



KAUSHIK ROY

#### GOOD HABITS

Certain habits can be easily developed to help rid yourself of digestive problems:

- Don't eat too fast. Instead, take your time and chew your food properly before swallowing it
- Wait at least 3 hours after your last meal of the day before going to bed
- Sleep with your head elevated (at least six inches) above your feet and use pillows to prop yourself up. This will allow digestive juices to flow into the intestines rather than to the oesophagus
- Eat plenty of raw foods and vegetables and fresh fruit as they contain natural digestive enzymes
- Avoid medications that may irritate the stomach lining—such as aspirin or other pain relievers

you become nutritionally deficient. So the best way to treat indigestion is to avoid foods and situations that may set it off. If stress is the underlying cause of your indigestion, then one should definitely find ways to de-stress. Exercise is a very effective way of de-stressing. "I advise my patients to stop reading newspapers and start exercising. Exercise releases happy hormones which relieve you off your stress," observes Dr Khanna.

Lastly, no article on digestion can be complete without mentioning supplemental digestive enzymes. Taking extra digestive enzyme supplements may not only help your body's natural digestive process, but also reduce gastrointestinal trouble.

#### Probiotics may help

Probiotics are dietary supplements of live bacteria or yeasts that have multiple health benefits including an improvement of the digestive process. They are extremely popular in India since around 60 per cent of our population at any given time harbours a stomach bug. The other benefit is lowering of cholesterol, since they convert cholesterol into a less absorbable form and hamper its absorption. There is also some indication that probiotics can reduce the generation of toxic and cancer-causing compounds produced in the intestinal tract.

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#### DO THIS

OPEN your curtains to tackle food cravings. If your home doesn't get enough natural light, it can make you feel depressed and crave sweet foods.

