

What **tummy doctors** tell their friends

We know, talking about this stuff can be (*gah!*) so embarrassing. Good thing these top doctors are willing to let it all out.

BY JENNIFER ABBASI

CUT BACK ON THE SWEETENERS

"My friends ask me about gas and bloating a lot. My first question: 'How much coffee do you drink?' Coffee stimulates the colon, and loading it up with artificial sweetener can make the effect even worse. Sugar substitutes draw water into the gastrointestinal tract, leaving you feeling full and gassy. They may even cause diarrhea, since all that water can have a laxative effect. My advice: Watch how much coffee you drink, and switch to regular table sugar or use artificial sweeteners only in moderation. Often, if people get rid of them, they see a remarkable improvement in their symptoms." —*Sophie Balzora, M.D., a gastroenterologist and assistant professor in the department of medicine at NYU's Langone Medical Center*

STRESS IS MAKING YOU SICK

"I tell my friends all the time that there's *definitely* a connection between the gut and the brain. There are many, many nerves in the gastrointestinal tract that, among other things, help you feel what's going on inside your gut. We're learning now that stress may heighten those sensations—that's why you get 'butterflies.' But it can also trigger real physical symptoms: For example, I often see patients who seem to have reflux disease, but when we do the appropriate tests, we can't make a diagnosis. The best treatment for their heartburn, then, is anything that will help them relax, like hypnosis or deep breathing. If that doesn't work, medications that calm the nerves in the gut, like low-dose antidepressants,

may help. If you're having these types of symptoms and they don't respond to the usual over-the-counter treatments, talk to your doctor. Once you've gotten to the root of the problem, you can get the help you really need." —*John Pandolfino, M.D., chief of the division of gastroenterology and hepatology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago*

TAKE THIS BEFORE YOU GO OUT

"I have friends who really struggle when they eat out because rich, fatty foods give them diarrhea. One actually owns a restaurant—you can imagine how difficult that would be. This can happen to anyone, because some people just digest rich food faster than others, but it can also be a sign of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which is far and away the most common GI complaint in young women. I tell my friends to take two Imodium (the over-the-counter medicine for diarrhea) before they head out to a restaurant. Many have never even thought to try it, but it will usually work to slow things down. If it doesn't, it's time to make an appointment with your doctor." —*C. Mel Wilcox, M.D., division director of gastroenterology and hepatology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine*

THAT SORE THROAT MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU THINK

"My aunt kept waking up with a cough, sore throat, and raspy voice. She went from one ear, nose, and throat doctor to another before she came and talked to me. Turns out she had acid reflux that was creeping up from her stomach into her airway while she was asleep. It can happen during the day, too—you might notice a tickle in your throat after you've finished eating—but it's especially common when you're lying down. I put her on medication and told her to eat only light meals in the evening, stopping completely four hours before bed. Then I suggested



she use books to elevate the head of her bed. It worked!" —*Aline Charabaty, M.D., a gastroenterologist and associate professor of medicine at Georgetown University School of Medicine in Washington, DC*

SORRY—THERE'S NO CURE FOR A RUMBLING TUMMY

"Last week, I was sitting in the dentist's chair when I noticed his stomach was growling. He apologized, but I just laughed and told him it happens to everyone. Those grumbling noises are essentially the heartbeat of the GI tract. Just like the heart, the muscles in the gut contract constantly—that's what drives food from your mouth down into your stomach and then the intestines. Occasionally those contractions get loud. It might happen when you're hungry, but sometimes the gurgling picks up for no reason at all—and it seems like it's always when you're in a meeting or a particularly quiet, inopportune moment. Unfortunately, there's not a lot you can do about it. Just know that it'll pass!" —*William Sandborn, M.D., director of the Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center at the University of California, San Diego*

FOOD POISONING IS NO JOKE

"Recently, a good friend came to see me. Her whole family had come down with food poisoning weeks before, but she felt like she had never gotten over it. She was nauseous. Her stomach hurt. She even had diarrhea. We ran some tests to rule out any serious conditions but ultimately decided that she likely had post-infectious irritable bowel. I see it all the time: Patients have a bout of gastroenteritis—caused by either a virus or bacteria—and after that, their guts become more sensitive. It can last for months! Obviously, you can't avoid every stomach bug that comes your way, but you *can* be more careful about how you handle food at home, especially around the holidays. Don't leave cooked dishes out for more than a couple of hours; bacteria grow faster as foods cool. Never leave pie or anything that contains milk or eggs unrefrigerated. And always reheat your leftovers to kill any residual

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bacteria. I once made the mistake of eating cold, days-old French toast—no fun.” —*Anne Peery, M.D., an assistant professor in the division of gastroenterology and hepatology at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine*

BAD BREATH? TRY THIS NATURAL CURE

"A friend of mine recently started dating again after losing her husband, and she told me, 'I have bad breath all the time.' She brushed her teeth and ate a healthy diet, and her dentist told her everything was fine. It wasn't until I ran a scope that we discovered the problem: She had a lot of residual food in her stomach. Some people have a slower digestive system, and foods, especially ones rich in fiber, tend to just sit. With time, they can ferment and cause bad breath. I started my friend on papaya enzymes, which are available at health-food stores. They help break down proteins in food, speeding digestion. Her bad breath cleared up, and she's happily dating now. Papaya enzymes might work for you, too—just see your doctor first to rule out anything more serious, like a gastric ulcer.” —*Aline Charabaty, M.D.*

YOUR BELLY NEEDS TO BREATHE

"When I'm examining patients who have heartburn, I often look at their tummy to see if there's an imprint from their pants or belt. Wearing clothes that are too tight—yes, that includes Spanx—increases pressure in the abdomen, causing acid and stomach contents to rise up. Even if you don't get heartburn, you might feel uncomfortably full; some patients even complain of belching. So if that sounds like you, stick to clothes that really fit you.” —*Sophie Balzora, M.D.*

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