

# REIN *in* PAIN

Burning, stinging, or aching can be a pain. Read on to delve into a few of the different types—and how what you eat may help manage what ails you. BY MARGE PERRY



**P**ain is the body's way of communicating something is wrong and needs attention. Pain sends a signal, for example, that the stove is burning your hand. Without that information, that hot burner would do more damage. While we might associate pain with a sharp, instant reaction, there are a few different types of pain.

## acute vs. chronic pain

Acute pain usually comes on suddenly (like from a fall) and is limited in duration. Chronic pain is ongoing and more resistant to medical treatment and management.

## how and where does it hurt?

When you go to the doctor complaining of pain, one of the first things they will do is classify your type of pain into one of the following categories:

▶ **Nociceptive** pain is damage to your body, such as from a broken bone or fire, that causes inflammation and damage to tissues. "We would call this 'normal' pain: We know why you get it and that it will heal in a certain amount of time," says Dr. Semih Gungor, director of pain medicine research at the Department of Anesthesiology at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

▶ **Neuropathic** pain is damage to the nerves. "Many mechanisms can cause it, and it can be anywhere in the nervous system—from skin to the brain—so it's harder to treat," Dr. Gungor says.

▶ **Psychogenic** pain often starts with nociceptive or neuropathic pain, but increases in severity or duration due to psychological factors such as depression, stress, or anxiety.

## on your nerves

When the brain and spine (your central nervous

system) can't send messages to peripheral nerves in your muscles, skin, arms, hands, legs, and feet, the affected body part may tingle, go numb, and/or become painful. This condition is known as peripheral neuropathy, and it can be caused by diabetes, chemotherapy, hereditary disorders, inflammatory infections, autoimmune diseases, and literally hundreds of other conditions. It can also be idiopathic, meaning that doctors cannot find its root cause.

Diabetes is the most common cause of peripheral neuropathy. Controlling blood sugar through diet can help manage symptoms. But because peripheral neuropathy can be caused by so many conditions, there is no one certain way to deal with its pain. Dr. Semih Gungor suggests having your blood levels of vitamin B12 checked. Some studies show a deficiency of B12, which is involved in the repair and regeneration of nerves, may be the cause.



→ **30 million** The number of people in the U.S. affected by peripheral neuropathy.





## PAIN IN THE ABS (AND GUT!)

Most people have experienced abdominal pain or gastrointestinal (GI) distress at least once in their lifetime. But for some, GI distress is ongoing and may be a result of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

IBS is a leading cause of abdominal pain and discomfort. According to the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders, IBS affects between 25 and 45 million people in the U.S., and females are more likely to have it than males. Symptoms can vary, but always include abdominal pain or discomfort and a change in bowel habits. It's not always easy to diagnose or treat.

"IBS is a functional disorder of the intestine, but an examination will be benign, blood tests won't show anything, and any biopsies will be normal," says Dr. Randolph Steinhagen, chief of the Division of Colon and Rectal Surgery at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City.

Because individual symptoms vary, diet recommendations are not a one-size-fits-all.

For some people, high fiber and lots of fluids might help. Avoiding trigger foods may help others. Dairy is a frequent offender, as are alcohol and gluten. "Often it comes down to trial and error for each individual," says Dr. Steinhagen. "A food diary can help correlate severity of symptoms to diet."

A low FODMAP diet (see "What is a Low FODMAP Diet?", right) may also help alleviate IBS symptoms. This diet eliminates foods that increase fermentation in the colon. "It is a difficult diet to follow," says Dr. Edith Ho, clinical associate professor of medicine in the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology at Stanford University School of Medicine. But it's not meant to be a lifelong solution, she says. "It's a diet designed to help find the food sensitivity." Once you know your sensitivities, you can start adding back in the foods that are not triggers. A 2019 review of several studies published in *Gastroenterology and Hepatology* found 50 to 80 percent of IBS patients following a low FODMAP diet reported symptom relief.

## what is a low FODMAP diet?

FODMAP is an acronym for fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides, and polyols. A low FODMAP diet consists of eliminating foods within each category, then adding one category back at a time to determine which might be a trigger for symptoms. Speak with a registered dietitian or your doctor before trying an elimination diet such as this. Here are some examples (not a complete list) of common FODMAP foods:

### ▶ oligosaccharides

*Wheat, onions, garlic, artichokes, inulin, lentils, chickpeas, broccoli, beans, Brussels sprouts, soy*

### ▶ disaccharides

*Lactose (milk, yogurt, soft cheese, ice cream)*

### ▶ monosaccharides

*Fructose (agave, honey, mangoes, watermelon, sugar snap peas, high-fructose corn syrup)*

### ▶ polyols

*Cherries, nectarines, apples, pears, mushrooms, cauliflower, xylitol, sorbitol*

Source: Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics



## INFLAMMATORY BOWEL DISEASE

← **ULCERATIVE COLITIS & CROHN'S DISEASE** IBD affects nearly 3 million Americans, according to the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation. Ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease are the most common types of IBD. Ulcerative colitis is a chronic inflammatory disease of the colon, causing small painful sores to form in the lining of the colon. Crohn's disease is similar but can affect all parts of the GI tract, not just the colon. Diet, meds, and surgery may be used to treat IBD.

## IBS vs. IBD

*These similar acronyms can be confusing. They have many of the same symptoms, but IBD is a disease with specific markers of inflammation, while causes of IBS are unclear.*



## don't eat your heart out

If you've ever felt a burning sensation in the upper half of your torso after eating a large meal, you've likely experienced heartburn, aka acid reflux. Lying down right after eating or after consuming alcohol, caffeine, or spicy foods can also lead to heartburn. Your first line of defense is to avoid those triggers, but sometimes you want to indulge in an espresso martini. Taking antacids or sleeping with your head and upper torso propped up with pillows can help alleviate symptoms.



## LIFESAVER

*We may work hard to manage it, but pain can help save your life. In fact, people with a rare genetic disorder called congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis syndrome do not experience pain and rarely live past the age of 25, according to a 2012 journal published in the Iranian Journal of Pediatrics.*



## PAIN-FIGHTING NUTRIENTS

Specific supplements or nutrients consumed through food may help decrease pain. Speak with your doctor before taking any supplement.

**CURCUMIN** Found in turmeric, curcumin can decrease inflammation and may be beneficial for those with inflammatory diseases, according to a 2020 study published in *Frontiers in Pharmacology*. However, the same study found too much turmeric led to GI pain. Work with your doctor to find the amount that works for you. Consider adding ground turmeric to smoothies or sprinkling it over eggs.

**VITAMIN D** "Studies show that vitamin D can decrease chronic pain. It also supports the immune system," Dr. Semih Gungor says. Before supplementing, check your vitamin D levels with your doctor. While we can get plenty of vitamin D from about 15 to 30 minutes of exposure to sunshine, if you live in the upper half of the U.S., consider taking a vitamin D3 supplement during the wintertime.

**MAGNESIUM** This mineral helps block pain receptors, which means it helps prevent the transmission of pain to your brain. Dr. Gungor recommends taking magnesium at night to help relax muscles and your brain. Bonus: A good

night's sleep helps aid in tissue recovery. Work with your doctor to make sure magnesium supplements won't interfere with any medications. Green leafy vegetables, nuts, beans, and whole grains are all great natural sources of magnesium.

**OMEGA-3S** These fatty acids reduce inflammation and may also lubricate your joints and cartilage, which may help with spine and joint pain. Dr. Gungor recommends eating fatty fish, such as salmon, one to two times per week.

**VITAMIN B12** Studies show that a vitamin B12 deficiency prevents nerves from healing properly. Have your levels checked by a doctor. B12 is found in animal products; vegans (and some vegetarians) will need to supplement—a standard multivitamin will provide the daily recommendation—or consume B12-fortified foods, such as cereals and nutritional yeast.

**ALPHA-LIPOIC ACID** "Many studies have shown alpha-lipoic acid helps with nerve pain," says Dr. Gungor. Your doctor can tell you how much you may need. This antioxidant (which is different than alpha-linolenic acid) is found naturally in animal products, particularly red meat and organ meats, but also in plants like spinach, broccoli, and yams.

## MEDITERRANEAN TO THE RESCUE ←

The Mediterranean diet—a healthy eating approach centered on fruits, vegetables, beans, whole grains, and healthy fats—may help control symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease. A 2021 study of

nearly 200 patients published in *Gastroenterology* concluded that the ease and health benefits of the Mediterranean diet should be considered to alleviate symptoms in patients with Crohn's disease.