

## Healthy Digestion

When our digestion is good, we don't think about it but during the festive season, we often notice bloating, reflux or abdominal pain. What causes this and what does it mean?

### What is Good Digestion?

- Good digestion means we take food in through our mouths, it progressively moves through the digestive organs being broken down and the nutrients extracted, then the waste products are eliminated through our bowels.

### Why is Good Digestion Important?

- Good digestion is critical to good health – if our digestive system isn't working effectively we can't extract the nutrients we need from our food.

### How do we Know if our Digestion isn't Working Well?

- The digestive process should go on in the background without you noticing it's happening.
- If there's a problem with the digestive system you may have reflux or heartburn, bloating, abdominal pain, nausea, gas, diarrhoea, constipation or incomplete bowel motions.

### Does Diet Impact on the Digestive System?

- What you eat can have a significant impact on the digestive system – A diet rich in fibre, such as whole grains and vegetables, encourages the food to efficiently pass through the digestive tract and can also help reduce the risk of digestive illnesses like diverticulitis and colorectal cancer.
- Salt and preservatives, found particularly in processed food, should be avoided as they have been linked with a number of illnesses including heart disease and inflammatory conditions.
- Large amounts of red meat can cause bloating and has been linked to colon cancer.
- Fats that are rich in omega-3, such as those contained in avocados or salmon, are good for the body but high levels of saturated fats, such as animal fats, have been linked to heart disease.
- Fluids, especially water, are vital to the digestive system as they help to dissolve some nutrients, assist the passage of food through the digestive system and soften the stools.

### Is How we Eat Important?

- Yes – overeating or eating in a hurry can both put stress on the digestive system. Bloating, reflux or heartburn, abdominal pain and nausea are often caused by overeating or hurried eating.

### What Else can Impact on the Digestion?

- Stress can irritate the nerves of the digestive system causing bloating, abdominal pain, nausea, constipation or frequent bowel motions or diarrhoea. Chronic or frequent stress can cause peptic ulcers or irritable bowel syndrome and may contribute to some cancers.
- Smoking can weaken the junction at the top of the stomach which may allow the stomach acid to backflow into the oesophagus. This may cause reflux or contribute to oesophageal cancer. Smoking also aggravates peptic ulcers, contributes to inflammation of the bowel and is linked to a number of cancers including pancreatic cancer.

### What Can Impact on the Digestion During the Festive Season?

- Overeating is common when there is so much good food around!
- Too much rich food such as foods high in saturated fats like cream or cheese, sugary food, red meat or greasy food (such as canapes like spring rolls) can upset our digestion.
- Excessive alcohol can be dehydrating as well as inflame the stomach and oesophagus.
- A lack of exercise – exercise can help to move food through the digestive tract.