

Don't Ignore That Stomach Pain



By Tina Vazirani, MD

When in doubt, check it out. That's my medical position about bouts of stomach pain. Not every gastrointestinal upset requires a trip to the doctor or ER, but stomach pain or ongoing discomfort can indicate that something is amiss and it's best to get it checked out, especially if the pain worsens or continues for more than 24 hours.

But let's be realistic—we all have belly pain occasionally. When you consider everything your stomach and surrounding organs are required to do to keep the body functioning, it's understandable. This kind of pain can be tricky for doctors to diagnose. A doctor will probably run lab tests and take down your long- and short-term medical history in order to diagnose the root cause of the discomfort.

There are a myriad of potential causes for abdominal pain, including emotional issues, eating certain foods,

gastrointestinal upset, flu, constipation, infections, food poisoning, muscle strain and just ordinary gas pains, which are harmless but can feel particularly alarming and painful.

In one of the most serious and rare scenarios, stomach pain can be an indicator of pancreatic cancer, predicted to be one of the top cancer killers by the year 2030. It typically spreads rapidly and is seldom detected in its early stages, which is why it's a leading cause of cancer death. The more common findings leading to suspicion for pancreatic cancer are yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes, upper abdominal pain radiating to the back, loss of appetite, weight loss and unexplained blood clots.

WHEN IT'S TIME TO SEE A DOCTOR

Immediate medical attention is required if abdominal pain is accompanied by one or more of these serious symptoms:

fever; diarrhea or blood in the stool; persistent constipation; change in the color of urine; continued nausea or vomiting; severe tenderness of the belly; jaundice or swelling of the abdomen. These symptoms could suggest a more urgent medical condition that can worsen over time. But the sooner you seek medical care, the faster your condition can be diagnosed and treated.

While severe stomach pain may be frightening, more often than not, the situation is acute (temporary) and can be resolved with medication and/or ongoing medical care provided by a physician specializing in gastroenterology.

Meet the Doc: Tina Vazirani, MD



Medical Specialty: Gastroenterology

Medical School: The College of New Jersey (TCNJ)/UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School

Residency: University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Board Certification: Internal Medicine, Gastroenterology

What led you to the medical field? I knew early on in high school that I wanted to be involved in the medical field. I excelled in science classes but also was fascinated by the social dynamic of medicine and the idea of helping others. I started volunteering at the local hospital where I was able to shadow physicians and gain insight to what it takes to practice medicine. My best friend and roommate passed away from cancer when I was in college and I was able to witness all aspects of her medical care, including the time of

diagnosis to the tough decision for her to undergo hospice care. This made my resolve to go into medicine stronger. We used to have long discussions on what it takes to become a good doctor. It not only takes intelligence, but the constant need for re-evaluation and compassion.

What interested you in gastroenterology in general? I became fascinated with gastroenterology during my internship. I was very fortunate to have mentors who were the best in the field and directly responsible for cutting edge advances in GI. The variety and the breadth of the field interests me the most. My day has a lot of variety and it allows me to be challenged intellectually and emotionally.

What is the most gratifying part of your job as a physician?

The most gratifying part is the connection I make with my patients. If you ever see me in the office, you know I love to talk and make the whole experience feel less intimidating. It's uncomfortable and awkward to talk about things like bowel movements or passing gas and I feel that it is important to make that connection so patients feel like you can be trusted.