Week Ten

Digestive Health in Menopause

Aims 🎯

- To identify any of your potential digestive symptoms
- To understand the process for an IBS 'diagnosis'
- To understand potential triggers to your symptoms

How Common Are Digestive Issues?

- 40% of people have at least one digestive symptom at any given time.
- 10-20% of people suffer with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).
- IBS is twice as common in women than men.

Common Digestive Symptoms

Abdominal Pain

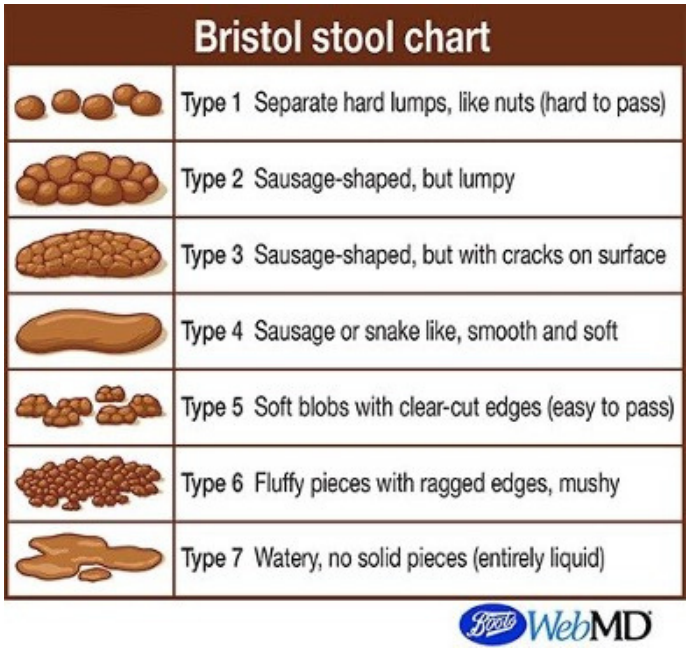
- This is due to trapped gas.
- Urgency and bloating are commonly seen alongside abdominal pain.

Bloating

- Bloating is caused by a build up of gas, which pushes the diaphragm down to protect the internal organs. This causes the stomach to stretch and become hard.
- Bloating around your menstrual cycle is normal. However, bloating that gradually builds up throughout the day is more often an issue.

Change in Bowel Movements

- If your bowel habits have changed over the past 3 months, there might be something more going on. For example, you may have passed stools once a day but now you go three times a day.
- These are changes within your bowel habits. Everyone has unique bowel habits, so don't start comparing your own to someone else's.



Constipation

- Slow transit constipation: stools spend a long time in the large intestine, where lots of water is removed, making the stool hard and dry.
- Evacuation disorder: muscles involved in 'pushing' stools out have a dysfunction.

Diarrhoea

- Occurs where theres a high volume of water in the intestines.
- Diarrhoea can also be caused by bacterial infections or food poisoning.
- Spicy food, fatty fried foods, coffee and alcohol also have some research which proposes a potential link with diarrhoea.

Urgency

- This is the feeling of needing the toilet immediately - with very little warning.
- This can lead to accidents.

Mucus

- Often occurs when you have a 'sluggish' gut.
- Mucus will look like a cloudy/milky substance in the toilet.

Incomplete Evacuation

- This is the feeling of having not quite finished going to the toilet.

Flatulence

- This is a natural bodily function, but changes in frequency and smell may indicate digestive issues.
- We typically fart 5-15 times a day. Ask yourself, has the frequency of passing gas increased recently?
- Bad smells occur when the gut breaks down sulphur-containing compounds into sulphur-containing gases, which really can smell!

Hidden Symptoms

- Depression and anxiety
- Incontinence and accidents
- Back ache
- Lack of sleep
- Painful sex
- Nausea
- Fatigue

Red Flag Symptoms

- Anaemia - shortness of breath, heart palpitations and pale skin
- Unexplained weight loss
- Anal bleeding
- Swelling or lumps in your stomach

Diagnosis

There isn't a 'positive' diagnosis for IBS - it's identified through the absence of other health conditions, including:

- Coeliac disease
- Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)
- Diverticulitis (infected or inflamed 'pockets' in the intestines)
- Cancer

You may be considered for assessment for IBS if you've been suffering from the following for at least 6 months:

- Abdominal pain
- Bloating
- Changed bowel habits

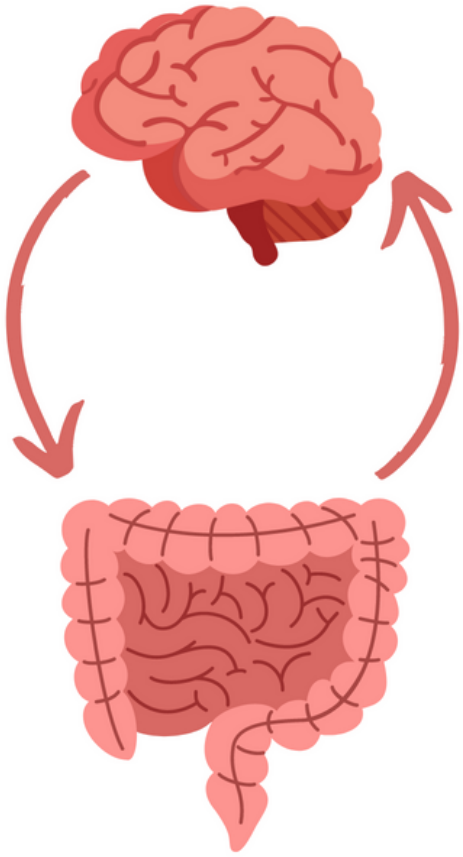
An IBS 'diagnosis' is given when:

- You're suffering from abdominal pain that's relieved by going to the toilet
- Bowel frequency and stools have changed

PLUS 2 or more of the following:

- Changed bowel movements
- Bloating
- Mucus
- Your symptoms become more severe after eating

Write your symptoms down here



Causes of Digestive Symptoms

The Gut-brain Axis

- The gut and brain are connected, which is why when you feel nervous for an interview, you can often feel it in your stomach.
- When under stress, the body enters a 'fight or flight' state. The body diverts blood flow away from the digestive system which can either slow gut transit or speed it up.
- Managing stress can make major differences to digestive symptoms.

Gastroenteritis

- Infections of bad bacteria can 'throw' the balance of gut bacteria off, which can result in digestive symptoms.

Antibiotics

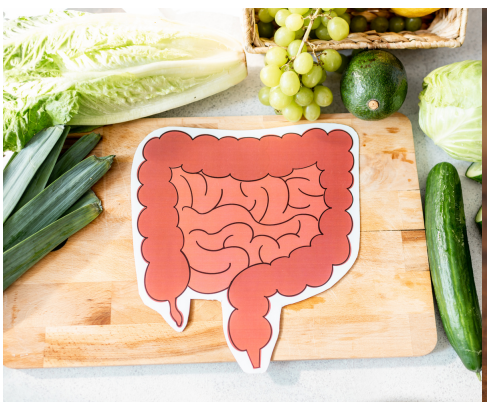
- Antibiotics don't discriminate when it comes to 'destroying' bacteria. This means antibiotics can remove good bacteria, which can disrupt the balance of the gut microbiota.

Abdominal Surgery

- Have you ever had surgery that left a scar? Did it ever become infected? Did you ever have to take antibiotics as a result?

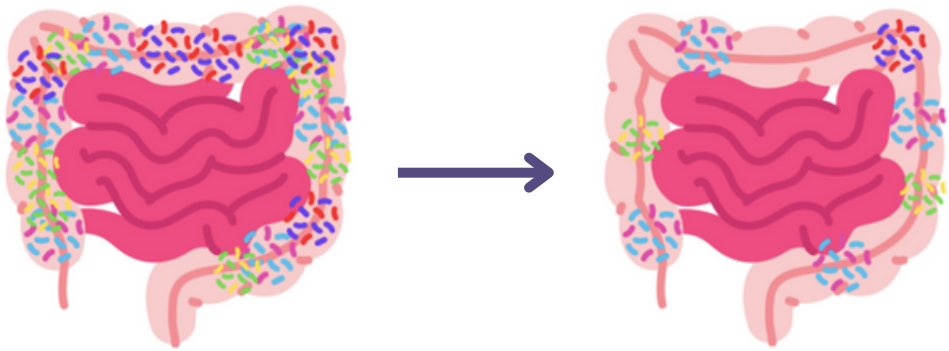
Lifestyle Factors

- Diet quality, partiularly your fibre intake, can influence your gut microbiota. Bacteria use dietary fibre to feed and grow. Drinking plenty of fluids is also important.
- Some individuals have dietary intolerances which may result in digestive symptoms. For example, lactose intolerance occurs due to a lack of the enzyme lactase.
- Regular exercise and movement helps to increase blood flow to the muscles in the gut. This is thought to affect the gut microbiome.



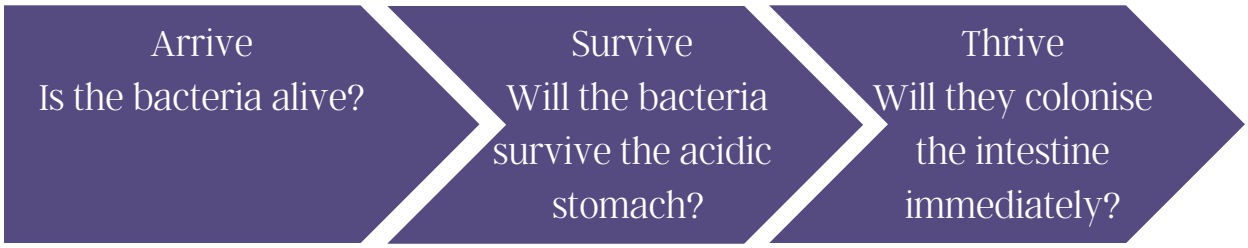
Gut Microbiota

- The gut microbiota refers to the microorganisms living in your gut. There are roughly 100 trillion microorganisms in the human gut, most of which are bacteria.
- Gut bacteria ferment dietary fibre, which they use to produce beneficial short chain fatty acids, such as acetate, propionate and butyrate. Gut bacteria also help produce vitamin K.
- Your gut bacteria can have multiple influences on your health, including supporting your immune system, playing a role in appetite regulation and influencing energy metabolism.
- The gut microbiota is largely influenced by environmental factors, with genetic factors playing only a small role. Studies involving identical twins has shown differences in gut microbiota, suggesting that the gut microbiota is unique. This means everyone has a slightly different gut microbiota.
- A disruption in the balance of your gut microbiota can result in digestive symptoms.



Supporting Gut Microbiota with Probiotics

- Probiotics are 'live microorganisms that, when administered in adequate amounts, confer a benefit on the host' (ISAPP).
- There are three factors to consider when looking for a probiotic, because unfortunately not all probiotics are equal.



Our probiotic supplement recommendations are:

- Symprove
- Optibac
- VSL#3

Some foods also contain probiotics:

- Yoghurt containing live bacteria
- Kimchi
- Sauerkraut
- Kefir

Menopause, Exercise and Gut Health

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Menopause, Exercise and Gut Health

We're learning more about the importance of gut health and the impact it has on our general health at various stages of our lives, including menopause.

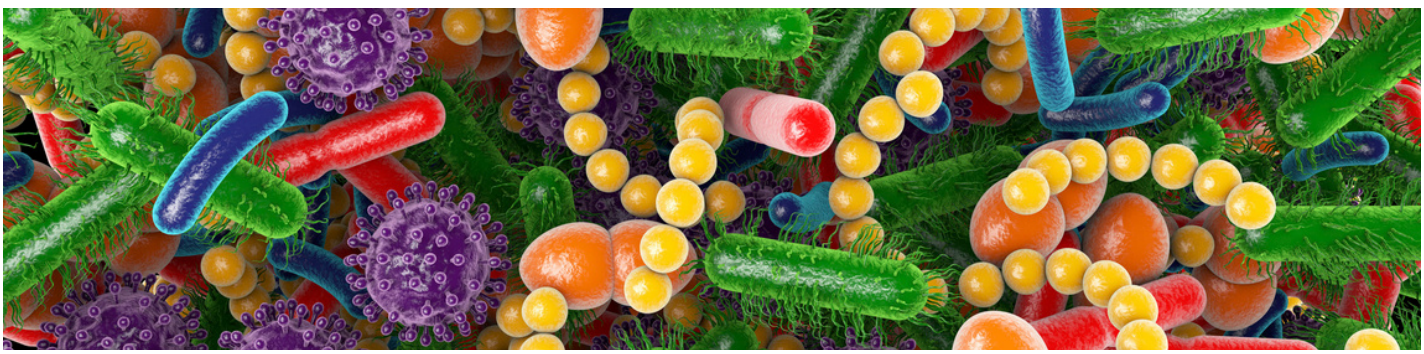
Your gut microbiota consists mostly of two dominant bacterial divisions: Firmicutes and Bacteroidetes. These bacteria affect our weight because they regulate how much energy we absorb. Some studies have described that the gut microbiota of obese animals and humans exhibits a higher Firmicutes/Bacteroidetes ratio compared with normal-weight individuals. Firmicutes absorb more (you're getting more calories from food); Bacteroidetes absorb less. Firmicutes dominant gut biomes are also associated with increases in inflammation, which can lead to weight gain and chronic diseases. Having a balanced, healthy gut microbiome is therefore key for inflammation and metabolism management.

Why does the menopause have such an impact? Well, your oestrogen and progesterone levels affect hormone receptors in your gut, which affect how efficiently your gut works. So, a change in those hormones also results in changes in your microbiome – the trillions of microorganisms, mainly bacteria, and their genetic material that live in your intestinal tract and are involved in functions critical to your health and wellbeing.

Oestrogen also helps to regulate cortisol – the 'fight or flight' hormone triggered by stress. As our oestrogen levels decline, we may feel as though we are not coping as well as we were. Cortisol also slows down the digestion of food which can lead to numerous digestive and gut imbalances.

And at the same time, if your gut is having to cope with inflammation triggered by lifestyle factors such as alcohol, certain foods, lack of sleep, or medication, it will affect the way other hormones, including serotonin – the happiness hormone – work.

So how can we regain digestive and gut balance through menopause? It's all about trying to eat, move, relax and sleep as well as we can.



The Benefits of Exercise for Digestive Health

The digestive system's role is to break down our food, eliminate toxins and absorb the key nutrients our bodies need to function. But as 70% of our immune system resides in the gut, if our gut health is affected (such as eating a bad diet, smoking or stress), so is our immune system, leaving us at increased risk of a wide range of health conditions including constipation, bloating and wind. Research has shown that gut health also plays a role in how our mental health, so if our gut health is under par, our mental wellbeing can also suffer. So, our digestive health is central to our overall wellbeing.

The good news? There are simple wins to help support good gut health. For example, did you know how we move our bodies affects our digestion? For one thing it helps stimulate the gut and increases intestinal activity. Physical activity increases blood flow to the muscles in the digestive system, which massage our food along the digestive tract – a process known as peristalsis – causing them to work more quickly and effectively, allowing food to pass through it much quicker, even when you're resting.

Exercise Enhances Gut Flora

It's no surprise that what you eat, and drink has a significant effect on your gut flora, but so too does your environment, stress, and any medication you might be taking. And hormone levels affect gut health too, so your gut microbiome changes throughout your life. However, it wasn't until recently that researchers found a link between exercise and the bacterial composition of the gut, showing exercise has a positive effect on the diversity of our gut bacterial composition... This suggests that exercise might be important to add as a therapeutic factor for maintaining a healthy digestive tract.

Research also suggests that exercise can affect the balance of bacteria in the gut. Your gut is home to more than one hundred trillion types of friendly bacteria which plays an active role in protecting our immune system, stopping the growth of more harmful bacteria and helps to digest food and absorb essential nutrients. So, it's important to try to move!

Ways Exercise Can Improve Digestive Health

Here's our top tips to ensure your digestive system is running smoothly:

- Try and be physically active every day: Walking will help improve your metabolism, as well as giving your digestive system a kick-start. Swimming can keep your digestive tract healthy by helping to reduce the length of time that it takes your food to digest, as well as reducing stress, which should have a positive impact upon other menopause symptoms.
- Try yoga: it's beneficial for digestive health and some yoga poses such as twists and forward bends are said to help relieve problems such as constipation. Why not ask our Harley Street At Home yoga experts for advice if this is an area you struggle with?
- Reduce stress: this can weaken your body's resistance, immune system, and digestive performance, leaving your feeling tired, bloated and lacking in energy. A good way of beating stress is to ensure that you're doing some form of exercise on a regular basis.
- Drink plenty of fluids: this encourages waste to be passed through the digestive system, aids digestion and helps prevent constipation. We should be drinking around 6-8 glasses of water a day to stay hydrated – more if you're moving as you'll lose more water through sweat.
- Practice deep breathing: research has shown that abdominal breathing exercises can strengthen the diaphragm and improve symptoms of acid reflux.
- Choose gentler exercise: While digestion is taking place, try to avoid high-impact exercise, which can cause discomfort and stitches, and stick to walking and other low-impact physical activities.

Answer the following

Did you know about the link between your gut and general health?

Have you taken steps to improve your gut health?

What have they been and how have they worked for you?

Have you found a difference in your gut health following regular exercise?

Abdominal Massage and Gut Health

Abdominal massage is a gentle, non-invasive treatment that may help to relax your stomach muscles which, in turn, can help stimulate digestion and relieve constipation.

Although more research needs to be done to support the effects, it might be something you'd like to try at home, as abdominal massage is safe for most people provided it's done in a gentle and safe manner.

To perform abdominal massage on yourself

1. Lie flat on your back with your tummy exposed.
2. Overlap your hands on your lower belly and focus on your breath.
3. Use the palm of your hand to massage your stomach in a clockwise direction several times.
4. Then massage the centre line of your abdomen, starting below your sternum and ending at your pubic bone.
5. Do three more lines an inch apart down the left side of the abdomen. Then, the same on the right side of the abdomen.
6. Press your fingers firmly but gently into your navel.
7. Continue massaging with gentle pressure and circle outward from your navel in a clockwise direction.
8. Spend extra time on specific areas that feel like they need extra attention.
9. Do this for up to 20 minutes.

Always see your doctor for any serious conditions or if any of your symptoms worsen or become severe.