

Keeping Your Stomach Happy on Vacation

There's never a good day for stomach problems. Especially if you are in the middle of a long-awaited vacation or a long summer drive.

Among the "most popular unpopular" stomach ailments, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and gastritis lead the list.

"IBS is characterized by abdominal pain and cramps, and has several variations: accompanied by constipation, diarrhea or both," shares Dr. Maria Abreu, gastroenterology expert at the University of Miami Health System. "With gastritis, the lining of the stomach becomes inflamed. You may not necessarily experience any symptoms. But they can include nausea, bloating, pain, indigestion, and loss of appetite."

Of the three ailments, Abreu explains that GERD can literally leave a bad taste in your mouth. Stomach acid or partially digested food is the culprit; it makes a U-turn and goes back up your esophagus. GERD can cause heartburn, discomfort in the chest, a cough, throat pain or irritation, and difficulty swallowing.

"It's important to keep in mind that chest pain can also be a symptom of a heart attack," she warns. "You should go to the emergency room immediately if you also are experiencing pain between the shoulder blades, on the left arm, in your jaw or upper abdomen; or if you feel dizzy, light-headed or have a tightness of the neck."

Proactive Prevention

Some stomach problems can be a complete surprise. For example, bacteria and

viruses aren't visible on food, so even the most vigilant person can get food poisoning. However, there are steps you can take to reduce your chance of having a flare-up of any of these conditions. Have a healthy gut? Follow these steps to keep it that way!

- Keep a food journal: This can help identify triggers for stomach problems or other conditions.
- Eat smaller meals: They're easier to digest; several smaller meals may help you stay satisfied throughout the day and avoid overeating.
- Take probiotics: Increase the good bacteria in your gut.
- Decrease stress: This can help your gut and make you healthier overall.
- Don't smoke: This is another one that will make you healthier overall.
- Monitor your weight: If you're overweight, work toward a healthier weight. If your weight is good, work to maintain it.
- Exercise: This will help with digestion and overall health.
- Treat other conditions: Stay on top of chronic conditions, including asthma, diabetes, or psoriasis; they can complicate your gut health.
- Limit alcohol use: If you drink alcohol, include it in your food journal.

Last but not least, certain symptoms can be a sign that something more serious is going on. If you see blood in your stool, have black stools, or experience vomiting or unexpected weight loss, visit your doctor as soon as possible. Or call UHealth Gastroenterology at 305-243-8644 (UMGI).