

My tummy feels swollen or bloated

Introduction

Many aspects of your life can be affected after being critically ill, and this includes how your body feels and how you are eating. It may be that you find eating more difficult than before and you may feel worried or low because of your difficulties.

Often, these problems get better as you get stronger, but you may need some help or advice while this is happening. This information sheet looks at common problems around eating after critical illness and gives you tips about what may help.

This information forms part of advice on 'Nutrition and recovery after critical illness', and is a sub-section of the '[Tips to help with eating problems after Critical illness](#)' leaflet. Also see the '[Nutrition when at home](#)' and '[Nutrition in the hospital](#)' information. Nutrition is the term used to describe what you eat or drink to give you energy and other nutrients to help your body recover and stay healthy.

Having this information may help you to understand more about nutrition, how it can help your recovery and overcome any difficulties with eating after your critical illness. We hope it will help you and your family, but if you have any particular nutritional questions or worries, please ask your doctor for help or see if they can refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian is a registered health care professional who advises about nutrition for health and during illness.

You can check how healthy your current weight is for your height on the NHS website¹. There are also very good self-screening tools to use to check whether you should be worried about how your low weight or poor eating may affect your health from the Patients Association² and BAPEN³.

If you have ongoing difficulties with eating, even after this advice, if you have a low weight or are continuing to lose weight or strength, do speak to your doctor or ask to see a dietitian.

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/>

² <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=3449fca0-dc52-4f06-ac75-3050b71d7bb5>

³ <https://www.malnutritionselfscreening.org/>

My tummy feels swollen or bloated

Bloating is when your tummy feels swollen and looks bigger. It can happen after eating or gradually build up through the day. It can be uncomfortable or painful and your tummy can feel full.

If your stomach or tummy often feels bloated, it could be because of:

- too much [excess wind](#) (gas)
- not having a poo regularly ([constipation](#))
- swallowing air or gas from fizzy drinks
- if you eat a food that causes a reaction in your body (a [food intolerance](#) or an allergy)
- a condition such as [irritable bowel syndrome](#) (sensitive digestion which affects the way your bowels work).

What changes can I make in my diet to help this?

Making changes to your diet can help or stop bloating. Changes that might help are:

- Not eating too much at a time as being too full can make your tummy feel uncomfortable.
- Chewing your food more. This can make it easier for you to break down food and make it go through your body more easily. Chewing more means you don't swallow so much air. Also, it makes you eat more slower which can stop you from eating too much in one go.
- Eating 5-6 smaller meals/ snacks per day, so you don't get too full at any one time.
- try not to miss any meals or eat late at night.
- Eating less fat. Fatty foods can take longer to go through your body and means your stomach is full for longer, and this can cause bloating. Ways to have less fat include:
 - eating less fried or creamy foods
 - taking fat that you can see off meat before you cook it
 - grill or oven bake foods rather than frying them
- Hot drinks can help food to go through your body more easily, but drinks such as too much coffee can make bloating and stomach problems worse. Try to only have 2-3 cups a day of drinks with caffeine in them. Instead try mint or fruit teas or decaffeinated tea and coffees.
- Cutting down on what alcohol you have as this can also make stomach problems worse.

- Certain foods can make you have more wind (gas). If this wind stays in your stomach (and it doesn't pass through your body and come out as wind) it can make you feel uncomfortable and bloated. There are some foods which might give you more wind, so try to cut down on foods such as:
 - beans and pulses
 - vegetables such as brussels sprouts, cauliflower, garlic, onions, cabbage, leeks, mushrooms
 - fruit such as apples, cherries
 - some artificial sweeteners such as xylitol, sorbitol and mannitol which are commonly added to sugar-free products like fruit squashes, mints or chewing gum.

If you cut down these foods, but it doesn't help your bloating, you can start eating them again.

- Eating more soluble fibre. You could eat more oats or oat bran (such as oat-based breakfast cereal or porridge) or try adding linseeds or flaxseeds (starting with ½ tablespoon a day and building to 1 tablespoon twice a day as required). Make sure you drink an additional 200ml water with each tablespoon of seeds that you add so that you don't get constipated.
- Consider trying probiotics. There are many different products available in either drink, powder or tablet form (generally called a probiotic). Choose a product high in bifido bacteria and try it for 1 month. If it doesn't help, you can stop having it.

What else can I do that may help?

There are lots of things that affect how our stomach and gut works, including how we feel and the relaxation or exercise we do.

Lifestyle tips to try are:

- Noticing how stress affects you and your body. In some people, stress slows down how food goes through your body, which can cause bloating, pain and constipation or it can cause an upset stomach and diarrhoea. Stress can make you not feel like eating, or it can make you gulp air. It can be difficult to avoid all stress but having ways to help you manage the stress can be really useful. For example, when you are tense, practise slow breathing or mindfulness exercises. If you are feeling very anxious, stressed or unhappy then it may help to try and calm yourself before eating. Try to keep mealtimes happy and relaxed and put off any difficult conversations until after a meal.
- Wear clothes that are not too tight around your waist, as these can increase the pressure on your stomach and make it harder for wind to pass along normally.
- Avoid swallowing extra air. It can help to:
 - cut back on chewing gum
 - eat and drink more slowly
 - chew your food more
 - don't smoke
 - make sure your dentures (false teeth) fit well if you have them, because this may affect how you chew and swallow your food.
- Having a warm bath, and spend time soaking, and relaxing. The heat of the bath can help a sore tummy. Doing this and finding other ways to relax can help you feel less stressed and this helps your stomach.
- Consider counselling to talk about the things that you are finding difficult or stressful. There may be things about your critical illness that you are upset about and need support with.
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Exercise and massage might help bloating and wind. For example:

- If you are able, try to move about regularly. If you are able to walk, get up to stretch your legs and tummy regularly (at least every hour). Stretching out by lying flat may also help you.
- Try to take regular exercise to help food to move through your body. This may be a walk if you are able to, or other movement exercises that you can do.
- Yoga poses may help if you can do them and if it is safe for you to do so. Certain yoga poses can help you release wind from your stomach. Poses such as Child's Pose, Happy Baby Pose, Knees to Chest pose and squats can all help pass wind through your bowels and out.
- Gently, but firmly, massage your lower stomach from right to left to release trapped wind. Ask a doctor before trying this if you have had any surgery on your stomach.

Are there any medicines that may help?

If these tips haven't helped, you can try medicines to help your bloating. There are different options such as:

- peppermint oil capsules, which can work by relaxing the gut muscles, allowing gas and poo to move along more easily. If you get heartburn you may want to avoid taking extra peppermint. Talk to your doctor or nurse about this if you are unsure
- antispasmodics. These help the gut to relax so they can help wind to come out
- antacids. These can help to reduce heartburn and can also affect your bloating
- flatulence treatment. These can help to reduce the pressure of trapped wind and help your stomach feel more comfortable.

Ask your GP or pharmacist for more information about what medicines might help you.

If your bloating continues, you are losing weight, or have pain and diarrhoea with it, speak to your GP. There may be a reason for your bloating such as food allergies, intolerance or Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

Summary

If you have bloating it may help to eat different foods, drink more, look at how you go to the toilet and exercise. If you need medicine, there are several different types that your doctor will be able to advise you on. As you get stronger after your critical illness, you will be able to eat a varied healthy diet which will help good digestion and your bowels to work normally.

More information:

Guts UK! Wind, burping, flatulence and bloating: <https://gutscharity.org.uk/advice-and-information/symptoms/bloating-and-wind/>

NHS Beat the Bloat: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/remedies-for-bloating-and-wind/>
NHS UK advice on:

- Stomach ache: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stomach-ache/>

British Dietetic Association Food Fact Sheet on:

- Probiotics <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/probiotics.html>

Mayo Clinic. Belching, intestinal gas and bloating: Tips for reducing them: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/gas-and-gas-pains/in-depth/gas-and-gas-pains/art-20044739>

See ICUsteps information for more information <https://icusteps.org/information>

This information sheet forms part of the wider Tips to help with eating problems after critical illness: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/tips-to-help-with-eating-problems-after-critical-illness.html>

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