



Functional Abdominal Pain in Children and Adolescents

Patient information Leaflet

December 2019

What is functional abdominal pain?

Functional abdominal pain is a common condition. About 10–15% of school aged children will report episodes of recurrent pain. Another 15% experience pain, but do not go to the doctor for it. Children and teenagers can suffer from frequent bouts of tummy pain over an extended period of time. The word “*functional*” means that there is no physical blockage, infection or inflammation causing the pain. Nevertheless, the pain is very real, and is due to extra sensitivity of the digestive organs and can be extremely distressing for children and their families.

What are the symptoms?

Children with functional abdominal pain often complain of central tummy pain. They have no other signs of serious illness such as fever, weight loss, persistent vomiting or blood in their poo. Sometimes, the pain may be associated with episodes of diarrhoea and constipation, but this is not the cause of the pain.

Functional abdominal pain is often associated with other symptoms, including headache, limb pain and difficulty sleeping. As a result it can have a major impact on your child’s day and can become a common reason for missing school. Doctors believe it is made worse by stress, anxiety and depression. The reason for this is further explained below.

What causes functional abdominal pain?

Although the condition has been extensively studied, we are still unsure of the exact cause. We think that the pain is due to overly sensitive nerves in the gut. In some children, the nerves become very sensitive, and pain is experienced even during normal intestinal function.

The gut has a huge network of nerves, which send signals to the brain to say we are hungry, full or ill. Sometimes these messages can be influenced by things outside the gut and misinterpreted by our brain e.g. feeling excited, nervous or stress.

For example, it is very common for children (and adults!) to not feel hungry on the morning of an important test or big performance. Others may need to visit the toilet many times, feel “butterflies” or even vomit.

The symptoms are real and do nothing to help the child deal with the pressure of the situation, but they are not caused by a physical disease. They disappear when the source of the anxiety disappears. This is known as the gut-brain axis and it affects everyone to some extent.

In children with functional abdominal pain, the gut-brain axis is over-reactive. Physical discomfort is felt more often and caused by milder things. This can become a vicious circle as everyone becomes more anxious about the pain, which then makes the pain worse.

You may wish to think about possible triggers in your child’s diet and to remove known irritants, such as the artificial sweetener sorbitol, fizzy drinks and caffeine. Studies have shown that medicines are not helpful in preventing or reducing functional abdominal pain and that distraction and other comforts are more useful, for example a trip to the park, having a bath or something else that your child finds fun or relaxing.

What tests should I expect the doctor to do?

Your doctor will ask you lots of questions about the tummy pain and other questions about diet, bowel habit and general health. They will also look at your child's growth. Depending on the answers to these questions your doctor may arrange for some blood tests to rule out serious, but much less common, conditions. They may also ask for a sample of urine or poo. Most of the time though, tests are not needed and your answers to the questions are more helpful.

How is functional abdominal pain treated?

It is important that your child understands that there is no physical abnormality which is causing their pain. It is also important to not allow the pain to become central in their life. Anxiety about a possible underlying disease, or everyone focusing on the pain, will make it worse. This does not mean that you should ignore the condition. The pain is real and it can be severe, but they need your help to reassure them and distract them from it, rather than to reinforce it.

For a younger child, it may be helpful to explain to them that their tummy is very sensitive and sometimes it hurts as the food goes round the bends. An older child may be able to understand the information and examples about the gut-brain axis given above. It is important that you do not allow the condition to change your child's social activities or allow it to become a reason for missing school. Even when the pain persists, it is reassuring to learn that this is a known condition, and that it is not dangerous. Being positive about getting better will send the right signals to your child.

If you have any questions you want to ask, you can use this space below to remind you

If you have a visual impairment this leaflet can be made available in bigger print or on audiotape. If you require either of these options please contact the Patient Information Centre on 0161 922 5332

If you require an interpreter, please ask an appropriate person to contact our central booking office between Monday to Friday 8am to 5pm on 0161 922 6991 to arrange this for you.

語言 翻譯及病者支持服務 (LIPS):

如果閣下需要翻譯員在您的預約當日幫助您的話 請找一名合適的家庭成員 0161 922 6991 聯絡本中央預約辦事處來您您安排 我們的辦公時間是星期一至星期五 上午 8 時至下午 5 時

Językowo Tłumaczeniowa Usługa Pomocy dla Pacjenta (Language, Interpretation and Patient Support Service LIPS):

Jeśli potrzebujesz pomocy tłumacza w trakcie swojej wizyty, proszę poprosić odpowiedniego członka rodziny o skontaktowanie się z Centralnym Biurem Zamówień (Central Booking Office), w celu zorganizowania tłumacza pomiędzy poniedziałkiem a piątkiem w godzinach od 08:00 - 17:00 pod numerem 0161 922 6991.

لینگوئج، انٹرپریٹیشن اینڈ پیسٹنٹ سپورٹ سروس (Lips)

اگر آپ کو اپنی اپائنٹمنٹ کے لئے مترجم کی مدد کی ضرورت ہو تو براہ مہربانی اپنے خاندان کے کسی موزوں فرد سے کہیں کہ وہ ہمارے سنٹرل بنگ آفس سے پیر سے جمعہ 8.00 بجے صبح سے 5.00 بجے شام کے دوران 01619226991 پر فون کر کے اس کا بندوبست کریں۔

Document control information

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