

# Gastroparesis

## Definition

Gastroparesis is a condition in which the muscles in your stomach don't function normally.

Ordinarily, strong muscular contractions propel food through your digestive tract. But in gastroparesis, the muscles in the wall of your stomach work poorly or not at all. This prevents your stomach from emptying properly. Gastroparesis can interfere with digestion, cause nausea and vomiting, and cause problems with blood sugar levels and nutrition.

There is no cure for gastroparesis. Making changes to your diet may help you cope with gastroparesis signs and symptoms, but that's not always enough. Gastroparesis medications may offer some relief, but some can cause serious side effects.

## Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of gastroparesis include:

- Vomiting
- Nausea
- A feeling of fullness after eating just a few bites
- Abdominal bloating
- Heartburn or gastroesophageal reflux
- Changes in blood sugar levels
- Lack of appetite
- Weight loss and malnutrition

## Causes

It's not always clear what leads to gastroparesis. But in many cases, gastroparesis is believed to be caused by damage to a nerve that controls the stomach muscles (vagus nerve).

The vagus nerve helps manage the complex processes in your digestive tract, including signaling the muscles in your stomach to contract and push food into the small intestine. A damaged vagus nerve can't send signals to your stomach muscles. This may cause food to remain in your stomach longer, rather than move normally into your small intestine to be digested.

The vagus nerve can be damaged by diseases, such as diabetes, or by surgery to the stomach or small intestine.

## Risk factors

Factors that can make it difficult for your stomach to empty properly include:

- Diabetes
- Abdominal surgery
- Infection
- Certain medications that slow the rate of stomach emptying, such as narcotic pain medications and antidepressants
- Certain cancer treatments
- Anorexia
- Bulimia
- Scleroderma
- Parkinson's disease
- Hypothyroidism

## Complications

Gastroparesis can cause several complications, such as:

**Bacteria overgrowth in the stomach.** Food that stays in the stomach can begin to ferment and disrupt the balance of good and bad bacteria. This can allow harmful microorganisms to grow out of control.

**Undigested food that hardens and remains in your stomach.** Undigested food in your stomach can harden into a solid mass called a bezoar. Bezoars can cause nausea and vomiting and may be life-threatening if they prevent food from passing into your small intestine.

**Blood sugar fluctuations.** Although gastroparesis doesn't cause diabetes, inconsistent food absorption can cause erratic changes in blood sugar levels, which make diabetes worse. In turn, poor control of blood sugar levels makes gastroparesis worse.