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What is a gentle approach to nutrition for GI conditions?

Also called the non-diet approach, this approach focuses on finding alternatives besides restrictive diets to help with GI symptoms.

Who benefits from this approach?

Everyone can benefit from a non-diet approach, especially those with gastrointestinal disorders suffering from disordered eating patterns or a diagnosed eating disorder, and anyone who would like to improve their relationship with food.

How to take a non-diet approach to treating GI disorders

Remember that healing your relationship with food is essential for overall health.

Regular nourishment and reducing disordered eating behaviors will also improve digestive symptoms.

- Our bodies and digestive tract need regular and consistent energy.
- Three meals and two or three snacks per day can help normalize gut motility and function.

For many with a gut disorder and/or restricted diet, the simple act of eating can cause symptoms. This usually gets better with improved food intake, and worse with decreased food intake.

Food is not always the cause of digestive symptoms.

Pleasure and satisfaction are an important piece of eating.

Build a supportive medical team — ideally a gastroenterologist, dietitian, therapist and/or GI psychologist — to discuss all treatment options, including but not limited to diet changes.

Explore other effective ways besides diet to treat digestive symptoms:

- Sleep
- Stress management
- Gut-directed hypnotherapy/cognitive behavioral therapy
- Acupuncture
- Medications/supplements

Don't take risks on non-evidenced based diets and tests.

A diet to treat a GI condition does not need to involve weight loss or calorie restriction, and a diet for weight loss is often not the best for gut health.

How to get started with gentle nutrition

Focus on the foods that you can eat, rather than the foods you avoid.

Work with your dietitian to find appropriate swaps for any favorite foods you may need to substitute (see chart below for examples).

Sample gentle diet suggestions for common GI disorders*

GI condition	**Gentle nutrition swaps**
GERD	Air-fried or baked French fries instead of deep fried
Celiac disease	Find gluten-free versions of your favorites (donuts, cookies, bread, etc.)
NAFLD	Olive-oil spread instead of butter
IBS	Increase low-fermentable soluble fiber, like oatmeal, chia seeds, flax meal, okra, potatoes

GI condition	Gentle nutrition swaps
IBD flare or gastroparesis	Blended fruit and vegetable smoothie or soup instead of raw salad
GERD or IBS	Add flavor from cumin, paprika, coriander, fresh herbs, infused oils instead of chili pepper, garlic, or onion

* Depending on your own condition and symptoms, these examples may or may not be relevant to you.

* To improve your tolerance of a food, eat smaller portions spread out over time.

Differentiate between discomfort and bodily harm

Determine with your doctor if eating a food that causes digestive discomfort is actually causing your body harm. For example, in celiac disease, eating gluten will cause intestinal damage even without discomfort; in fructose intolerance, eating fructose will cause discomfort but no damage.

It is your body, you get to decide

You may decide that some discomfort is worth eating the food. For example, if you are lactose intolerant and you choose to eat ice cream, you know you will have symptoms a few hours later, but the pleasure of eating may be worth it to you.

Resources about gentle non-diet approach to nutrition

See “Intuitive Eating” handout for more, as this is the last principle of Intuitive Eating®. The other nine steps are essential to making peace with food.

- intuitiveeating.org/10-principles-of-intuitive-eating/
- nationaleatingdisorders.org/
- haescommunity.com/

Now it is time to meet with a GI-expert dietitian. To get more information about this topic, find a dietitian in your area using our **Find a Health Care Provider tool**.

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