

Functional Abdominal Pain in Children



What is functional abdominal pain?

Children who complain of stomachaches for over three months are likely to have functional abdominal pains. The term “functional” refers to the fact that even after many tests, no clear explanation is found for the pain. There is no blockage, irritation or infection to cause the discomfort. But the pain is very real.

Because of the pain, children might stop their usual activities and they often complain of nausea, excessive gas, diarrhea, or constipation. Fortunately, despite the chronic pain, the children grow well and keep their general good health.

How common is functional abdominal pain?

Functional pain is very common. About 10 – 15% of school aged children will report episodes of recurrent pain. Another 15% will experience pain, but will not go to the doctor for this problem.

Why does it happen?

Your child’s intestine has a complicated system of nerves and muscles that helps move food forward and carry out digestion. In some children, the nerves become very sensitive and pain is experienced even during normal intestinal activities. The pain can cause your child to cry, make his face pale or red, and he/she might break into a sweat.

An infection caused by a virus or bacteria, being under stress, or being tired may make the intestinal nerves more sensitive. Other family members may have a similar problem.

How is functional abdominal pain diagnosed?

A careful history of how the pain started, its location, and how it progressed often suggests the diagnosis for your child’s problem. Blood, urine and stool tests will be performed to rule out some conditions that can present with recurrent pain. A

history of certain food intolerances, such as for dairy products or juices, can help explain crampy pain and excess gas. X-rays, CT scans and endoscopy are only recommended for children where the history or exam raise questions about the diagnosis.

How is functional abdominal pain treated?

It is important to prevent the pain from becoming a reason for missing school, changing your child’s social activities or for making it the center of everyone’s attention at home.

You and your child should be reassured that there is no serious undiagnosed problem. Being positive about getting better will send the right signals to your child.

If diet can be modified, if the child can have a restful night, and if stress can be decreased, pains will improve. As much as possible, your child should continue with a normal life.

The use of medication in functional pain needs to be discussed with your physician. Muscle relaxers, antacids, or fiber supplements can be prescribed and are sometimes helpful in some children.

For more information or to locate a pediatric gastroenterologist in your area please visit our website at: www.naspghan.org

IMPORTANT REMINDER: This information from the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (NASPGHAN) is intended only to provide general information and not as a definitive basis for diagnosis or treatment in any particular case. It is very important that you consult your doctor about your specific condition.

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