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## Gastrointestinal fistula

A gastrointestinal fistula is an abnormal opening in the stomach or intestines that allows the contents to leak to another part of the body.

- Leaks that go through to a part of the intestines are called entero-enteral fistulas.
- Leaks that go through to the skin are called enterocutaneous fistulas.
- Other organs can be involved, such as the bladder, vagina, anus, and colon.

### Causes

Most gastrointestinal fistulas occur after surgery. Other causes include:

- Blockage in the intestine
- Infection (such as diverticulitis)
- Crohn disease
- Radiation to the abdomen (most often given as part of cancer treatment)
- Injury, such as deep wounds from stabbing or gunshot
- Swallowing caustic substances (such as lye)

### Symptoms

Depending on where the leak is, these fistulas may cause diarrhea, and poor absorption of nutrients. Your body may not have as much water and fluids as it needs.

- Some fistulas may not cause symptoms.
- Other fistulas cause intestinal contents to leak through an opening in the skin.

### Exams and Tests

Tests may include:

- Barium swallow to examine the stomach or small bowel
- Barium enema to examine the colon
- CT scan or MRI of the abdomen to look for fistulas between loops of the intestines or areas of infection

- Fistulogram, in which contrast dye is injected into the opening of the skin of a fistula and x-rays are taken

## Treatment

Treatments may include:

- Antibiotics
- Immune suppressing medicines if the fistula is a result of Crohn disease
- Surgery to remove the fistula and part of the intestines if the fistula is not healing
- Nutrition through a vein while the fistula heals (in some cases)

Some fistulas close on their own after a few weeks to months.

## Outlook (Prognosis)

The outlook depends on the person's overall health and how bad the fistula is. People who are otherwise healthy have a very good chance of recovery.

## Possible Complications

Fistulas may result in malnutrition and dehydration, depending on their location in the intestine. They may also cause skin problems and infection.

## When to Contact a Medical Professional

Contact your health care provider if you have:

- Very bad diarrhea or other major change in bowel habits
- Leakage of fluid from an opening on the abdomen or near the anus, particularly if you have recently had abdominal surgery

## Alternative Names

Entero-enteral fistula; Enterocutaneous fistula; Fistula - gastrointestinal; Crohn disease - fistula

## References

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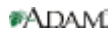
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