

Anxiety & Digestion

Understanding the gut-brain connection

Your brain and digestive system are in constant communication through the gut-brain axis. That is why stress or anxiety can sometimes show up as nausea, stomach pain, bloating, changes in appetite, diarrhea, constipation, or reflux.

How anxiety can affect digestion

When the body shifts into a fight-or-flight response, digestion can temporarily change. Some people notice symptoms only during stressful periods; others may experience a repeating cycle of anxiety and digestive discomfort.

- Nausea or a “nervous stomach”
- Stomach pain, cramping, bloating, or gas
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Changes in appetite or feeling full quickly
- Heartburn or reflux
- Increased awareness of normal digestive sensations

A common cycle

Anxiety > digestive symptoms >
worry about symptoms > more anxiety

What may help

- Eat regularly. Skipping meals can worsen shakiness, nausea, low energy, and irritability.
- Keep meals simple when your stomach feels sensitive. Gentle foods can still provide meaningful nourishment.
- Aim for balance: include a source of carbohydrate, protein, and fat when you can.
- Sip fluids regularly throughout the day.
- Notice how caffeine affects you; higher amounts can mimic or intensify anxiety symptoms.

Support your gut without perfection

- Include fiber from fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, and seeds. Increase it gradually if your intake is currently low.
- Slow the pace of meals when possible. Sitting down, relaxing your shoulders, and taking a few calm breaths can help the body shift out of “high alert.”
- A varied diet can support the gut microbiome. Foods like yogurt, kefir, whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, and seeds are useful options.
- Avoid unnecessary food restriction. Cutting out many foods can increase stress around eating and make it harder to meet nutrition needs.

When to reach out for support

Anxiety can contribute to digestive symptoms, but not every digestive symptom is caused by anxiety. Talk with a qualified healthcare professional if symptoms are persistent, worsening, or interfering with daily life.

- Blood in the stool
- Persistent vomiting
- Significant or unexplained weight loss
- Severe or worsening abdominal pain
- Difficulty swallowing
- Persistent diarrhea or constipation
- Signs of dehydration

The takeaway

Supporting digestion during periods of anxiety does not require a perfect diet. Start with the basics: eat regularly, nourish yourself adequately, stay hydrated, notice how caffeine affects you, include a variety of foods, and slow down when you can. Nutrition is one piece of the picture alongside mental health care, sleep, movement, social support, and medical care.