

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT GASTROINTESTINAL BLEEDING

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What is gastrointestinal (GI) bleeding?

- Bleeding in the digestive tract.
- The upper digestive tract includes the esophagus, stomach, and upper portion of the small intestine.
- The lower digestive tract includes lower portion of the small intestine, large intestine (also called the colon), and anus.
- Most causes of bleeding are curable or controllable, but some may be life-threatening if left untreated.

What causes bleeding in the digestive tract?

Causes of bleeding in the upper digestive tract include:

- Peptic ulcers from *Helicobacter pylori* infections or long-term use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as aspirin and ibuprofen.
- Varices (enlarged veins) in the lower esophagus that rupture and bleed.
- Tears in the lining of the esophagus or inflammation in the lining of the stomach (gastritis) or esophagus (esophagitis).
- Cancerous or noncancerous (benign) growths.

Causes of bleeding in the lower digestive tract include:

- Diverticular disease (diverticula are irregular pouches that develop in the colon wall).
- Colitis (inflammation of the colon) or angiodysplasia (abnormalities in blood vessels of the intestine).
- Hemorrhoids (ruptured veins in the anus or rectum) or fissures (anal cuts or tears).
- Cancerous or noncancerous (benign) growths.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Vomiting bright-red blood or vomit that looks like coffee grounds indicates bleeding in upper digestive tract.
- Black or tarry stool or stool that contains dark or bright red blood indicates bleeding in upper or lower digestive tract.



- Chronic bleeding (light bleeding that continues for a long time or starts and stops) may lead to fatigue, lethargy, and shortness of breath over time.
- Acute bleeding (heavy bleeding) may lead to dizziness or faintness, shortness of breath, abdominal pain, and shock.

How is it treated?

- Medical imaging techniques, such as endoscopy or angiography, may be used to locate the source of the bleeding inside of the digestive tract and to stop the bleeding.
- Surgery may be needed if these interventions do not work.
- Your doctor will try to prevent future bleeding by treating the condition that is causing the bleeding.

For More Information

<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/bleeding/>
<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/Spanish/pubs/bleeding/index.aspx>
Information on bleeding in the digestive tract from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), in English and Spanish.

http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/lowergi/Lower_GI_Series_T_508.pdf
Information on the lower GI x-rays ordered to help diagnose problems of the large intestine from the NIDDK.

ACP[®]
AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS
INTERNAL MEDICINE | Doctors for Adults