

Your Gastroenterologist – A Digestive Specialist

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What Is a Gastroenterologist?

A gastroenterologist is a specialist in the digestive system.

The digestive system includes the 25-foot-long tube that processes food and nutrients. It also includes the liver, pancreas and gallbladder. These organs break down and absorb the food we eat so that the nutrients can be transported into the blood stream and delivered to cells throughout the body.

"Good" digestive health indicates an ability to process nutrients through properly functioning gastrointestinal organs, including the stomach, intestine, liver, pancreas and gallbladder. When these organs do not function properly, patients may need to see a gastroenterologist.

Gastroenterologists, or "GI doctors," are medical specialists with extensive training in diseases of the digestive tract. Often, gastroenterologists lead teams of nurse practitioners (NPs) or physician assistants (PAs) who also focus on digestive health.

Gastroenterologists, NPs and PAs can listen to your problems, perform tests to make a diagnosis, answer your questions and prescribe the best course of treatment to help you feel better.

Gastroenterologists, NPs and PAs who are members of the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) demonstrate an exceptional level of commitment to excellence in gastroenterological research, education and clinical practice.

Gastroenterologists Are Highly Trained Physicians

Gastroenterologists complete four years of medical school and three years of internal medicine residency, followed by a fellowship in gastroenterology. The rigorous fellowship takes two to four years to complete and ensures the physician is uniquely and highly qualified to diagnose and treat disorders of the digestive tract.

During a GI fellowship, doctors learn about disorders of the GI tract including: screening for gastrointestinal cancers, esophageal problems, GERD, ulcer disease and Helicobacter pylori, gallbladder and bile duct diseases, pancreas disorders, cellular and molecular physiology, endoscopy, ethics, medical economics and system-based practice, geriatric gastroenterology, liver disease and pathology, inflammatory diseases of the intestines, infections of the intestines, motility and

functional illnesses, nutrition and obesity, pediatric gastroenterology, radiology, research, surgery, women's health issues, and cancers of the esophagus, stomach, liver, pancreas, small intestines and colon.

Illnesses Treated by Gastroenterologists

In addition to rare disorders of the digestive system, gastroenterologists diagnose or treat the following common conditions:

- * Colorectal cancer, including determining whether you have a genetic risk
- * Viral hepatitis
- * Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- * Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), including Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis
- * Diverticulitis, diverticulosis and ischemic bowel disease
- * Celiac disease and food intolerances
- * Heartburn and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)
- * Chronic vomiting and gastroparesis
- * Functional illness, such as constipation, diarrhea, vomiting, belching and flatulence
- * Peptic ulcer disease and Helicobacter pylori
- * Acute and chronic pancreatitis
- * Gallbladder disease
- * Appendicitis
- * Nutritional deficiencies
- * Obesity
- * Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease
- * Cirrhosis
- * GI infections caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi and protozoa

If you have any of these conditions, a gastroenterologist is the best physician for you to see.

Tests Performed by a GI Doctor

Gastroenterologists use a number of techniques to view the organs of the digestive tract. The most common tests they perform are colonoscopy and upper-GI endoscopy (EGD).

Colonoscopy is performed to examine the large intestine for disease, most commonly colorectal cancer. Everyone aged 50 and older should be screened for colorectal cancer. When performing a colonoscopy, the gastroenterologist uses a long, thin, flexible tube with a tiny video camera and a light on the end — called the colonoscope — to view the entire colon and rectum and check for polyps, inflammatory changes or cancer. If polyps are found, they often can be removed with this procedure.

Endoscopy can be helpful in the evaluation or diagnosis of various problems, including difficult or painful swallowing, pain in the stomach or abdomen,

bleeding, ulcers, tumors, and problems with the gallbladder, pancreas and bile ducts. An endoscope is a long, thin, flexible tube with a tiny video camera and light on the end. By adjusting the controls on the endoscope, the gastroenterologist can safely guide the instrument to carefully examine the inside lining of the upper digestive system. In some cases, GIs can treat digestive conditions through the endoscope.

Some gastroenterologists perform newer tests to examine the GI tract, such as CT colonography where the GI doctor can inspect radiological images of the colon to check for polyps and cancers, and capsule endoscopy, during which the patient swallows a camera that records images of the GI tract.

For digestive health issues, it's best to see a doctor who specializes in the digestive tract
- a gastroenterologist.