**Constipation**
A condition in which the stool becomes hard and dry which may cause bowel movements to become difficult and painful. Although there is no “correct” number of daily or weekly movements, an individual who suffers from constipation usually has less than three bowel movements in a week. Other symptoms of constipation may include feeling bloated, uncomfortable, and sluggish.

Some common causes of constipation include:
- Inadequate amounts of fiber in the diet
- Not enough liquids
- Lack of physical activity
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Changes in life or routine such as pregnancy, aging, and travel
- Problems with intestinal function, colon, and rectum
- Functional Bowel Disorders (e.g., Irritable Bowel Syndrome)
- Certain medications (e.g., cough medicine, antacids with aluminum and calcium carbonates, antihistamines)
- Abuse of laxatives

Treatment for constipation may include:
- Eating more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables
- Increasing fluid intake (non-caffeinated beverages)
- Increasing levels of physical activity
- Not ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Using over-the-counter or prescription stool softeners or laxatives
- Talk to your doctor to know what is best for you.

**Diarrhea**
A condition in which there are frequent, loose, and watery bowel movements. Although diarrhea usually subsides on its own within 1-2 days, there is a risk for dehydration. Dehydration occurs when there is a loss of fluids from the body and it can interfere with the body’s ability to function properly. Some common symptoms that may accompany diarrhea include: abdominal pain, cramping, bloating, nausea, or the urgent need to use the restroom.

Common causes of diarrhea may include:
- Food and water contaminated by bacteria, viruses, or parasites
- Food intolerance (e.g., lactose intolerance)
- Certain medications (e.g., antacids containing magnesium, antibiotics)
- Intestinal diseases (e.g., Celiac disease)
- Functional Bowel Disorders (e.g., Irritable Bowel Syndrome)

Treatment for diarrhea may include:
- Replacing lost fluids and electrolytes to prevent dehydration
- Consuming a clear liquid or bland diet (e.g., chicken broth; rice)
- Using over-the-counter medications (e.g., Imodium AD)

**Gastroenteritis**
An infection or irritation, often referred to as the stomach or intestinal flu, of the digestive tract (stomach and intestines) that may produce symptoms of nausea, vomiting, cramping, or diarrhea. Symptoms usually last 24-36 hours and may be caused by the following:

- Food and water contaminated by bacteria, viruses, or parasites
- Foods that irritate the lining of the stomach
- Emotions such as anger, fear, or stress
- Disruption of bacterial equilibrium in the intestines due to illness, diet changes, some antibiotics, or alcohol

Medical care is advised if:
- Symptoms last longer than, or become more severe, after 48-72 hours
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea do not subside
- Stomach cramping is severe or localized to the lower right abdomen
- No urination over a 12 hour period
- History of diabetes, chronic illness, or pregnancy
Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)
Caused by the inability of the lower esophageal sphincter (ring of muscle at the bottom of the esophagus that acts like a valve between the esophagus and stomach) to properly close, thus allowing stomach acid to flow back into the esophagus. The most common symptoms of GERD include persistent heartburn (burning sensation of the chest and throat) and acid regurgitation. If left untreated this condition can lead to serious health problems. A visit with a health care provider is recommended.

Although the exact cause of GERD is unknown, the factors that are believed to contribute to it include:
- Hiatal hernia
- Alcohol use
- Obesity
- Pregnancy
- Smoking
- Certain foods (e.g., citrus fruits, chocolate, caffeine, fatty and fried foods, garlic and onions, mint flavorings, spicy foods, tomato-based foods like spaghetti sauce, chili, and pizza)

Most people can manage the discomfort of heartburn with lifestyle changes and over-the-counter medications. For people with GERD, these remedies may offer only temporary relief. People with GERD may need stronger medications, even surgery, to reduce symptoms.

Other relaxation techniques
- Talk to your health care provider to see if OTC products are right for you.
- Antacids (Maalox, Mylanta, Rolaids, Tums) help to neutralize stomach acid and provide quick relief. Over use of some antacids can cause side effects such as diarrhea or constipation.
- H-2 receptor blockers (Tagamet HB, Pepcid AC, Zantac 75) help to reduce acid production. H-2 receptor blockers don’t act as quickly as antacids, but they provide longer relief.
- Proton pump inhibitors (Prevacid 24 and Prilosec OTC) help block acid production and heal the esophagus.

Lifestyle Tips to Reduce Symptoms of GERD
Maintain a healthy weight. Excess pounds put pressure on your abdomen, pushing up your stomach and causing acid to back up into your esophagus. Ask your doctor for help planning a weight loss strategy that will work for you.
- Avoid foods that trigger heartburn, such as fatty or fried foods, alcohol, chocolate, mint, garlic, onion, and caffeine.
- Wait at least two or three hours after eating before lying down or going to bed.
- Elevate the head of your bed. An elevation of about six to nine inches puts gravity to work for you.
- Don’t smoke. Smoking decreases the lower esophageal sphincter’s ability to function properly.

Individuals who suffer from these conditions on a regular basis should contact a health care provider.

References
- digestive.niddk.nih.gov [National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDICCC)]
- www.iffgd.org (International Foundation for Functional)
- www.mayoclinic.com (Mayo Clinic)