

Functional abdominal pain

This leaflet offers more information about functional abdominal pain in children and young people. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

What is functional abdominal pain and why has my child got it?

Functional abdominal pain (FAP) is common in children or teenagers

The word functional means that there is no physical blockage, infection, inflammation or disease causing the pain.

FAP can be very upsetting for children and their families.

Although FAP has been studied, the exact cause is not known.

It may be due to overly sensitive nerves in the gut. The gut has a huge network of nerves which send signals to the brain to say we are hungry, full or ill. Sometimes things outside the gut can affect these messages and they are misinterpreted by the brain.

For example it is common not to feel hungry on the morning of an important test or big performance, or to visit the toilet many times, or even vomit. The symptoms are real and don't help with the pressure of the situation, but they are not caused by a physical disease.



What are the signs and symptoms?

Children with FAP complain of recurrent tummy pain, usually around their belly button, which goes on for at least three months. They have no other signs of serious illness, such as fever, weight loss, persistent vomiting or blood in their poo. Sometimes, the pain may happen at the same times as episodes of diarrhoea and constipation, but this is not the cause.

FAP is often linked with other symptoms such as headache, limb pain and difficulty sleeping.

It can have a big effect on your child's day and can become a reason for missing school or activities. It is made worse by stress, anxiety or low mood.

Does my child need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

At your first visit, the doctor will ask you lots of questions about the tummy pain and other things such as diet, bowel habits and general health. They will also look at your child's growth.

Depending on the answers they may arrange for some blood tests to rule out serious, but much less common, conditions. They may also ask for a sample of urine or poo.

Most of the time tests are not needed and your answers to the questions are more useful.

What treatments are available?

Your child should understand that there is no serious physical problem causing their pain, and they should try not to let the pain become central in their life.

Everyone focusing on the pain or worrying about a possible underlying disease will make it worse.

This does not mean you should ignore the pain, as it is real and can be very bad, but try to reassure and distract your child from it, and not reinforce it. Try not to allow the pain to change your child's social activities or to become a reason for missing school.

It may help a younger child to explain to them that their tummy is very sensitive and sometimes hurts as the food goes round the bends. An older child may be able to understand the information and examples given in this leaflet.

Research shows that medicines do not prevent or reduce FAP and that distraction works best, e.g. a trip to the park, a game, or something else your child finds fun or relaxing. In older children, yoga and active relaxation or hypnotherapy may help and there are Apps you can get to help with this.

What happens if my child does not get treatment?

FAP tends to improve with time and most children eventually grow out of it, without any specific treatment other than distraction.

Is there anything I can do to help my child?

You can try to remove known irritants from your child's diet, e.g. sorbitol (an artificial sweetener), fizzy drinks and caffeine. Keeping a food diary for a week can help try and find any food which may trigger your child's pain.

Children and young people who are a normal healthy weight, eat a balanced healthy diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables, and get regular exercise have healthier guts.

Useful sources of information

www.patient.co.uk/health/the-gut

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about functional abdominal pain, please contact the paediatric medicine secretaries on 020 8725 3648 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4.30pm), giving the name of the doctor you saw, if possible. Out of hours, please leave a voice message.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

