

Read your tummy clock

When stomach pain strikes, picture your abdomen as a clock – where it hurts can reveal what's wrong and what to do next

10 O'CLOCK

A sudden sharp pain that's moved from mid-stomach to the upper right could indicate gallstones – hard balls of cholesterol that gather in your gall bladder, and then move through the bile duct. 'Rest, drink lots of water and avoid fatty foods,' advises Dr Damien Lynch, consultant physician and gastroenterologist. 'But if the pain lasts longer than five hours, you're sick, have a high temperature, the whites of your eyes become yellow or you pass clay-coloured stools, call your GP.' Pain in this area, especially if it's accompanied by a bloated feeling and is relieved by going to the loo, could also be a variant of IBS.

12 O'CLOCK

'Twelve o'clock is the highest point on your stomach, just below your sternum. If you feel a burning pain here, it's most likely to be heartburn, caused by stomach acid making it's way up your gullet,' says Dr Lynch. If it happens after a big meal, a boozy night out or during pregnancy, don't worry. 'Antacids from the pharmacy should soothe the pain,' he advises. 'If it happens at night, try sticking a couple of books under the legs of your bed so your head is higher than your feet – this will stop the acid flowing upwards.' But if you get heartburn regularly, you find it hard to swallow food or you've lost a lot of weight, see your doctor.

7 O'CLOCK

If your pain started in the middle of your tummy, but has moved to the bottom right side and is getting more severe over the course of several hours, you could have appendicitis. If so, the pain is likely to intensify if you press the area and you may lose your appetite or even be sick, develop a high temperature and become constipated. 'Although it could be something less serious, if the pain won't go away, don't ignore it – get medical attention,' advises Dr Lynch. 'If your temperature is over 38°C or the pain spreads across your whole stomach, call 999, as your appendix may have burst and will need to be removed asap.'

4 O'CLOCK

'Pain here could either be a urinary tract infection (UTI) or endometriosis,' says Dr Lynch. 'Both cause pain in your lower abdomen and are really common – around 2 million women have endometriosis, and one in two women will suffer with a UTI at some point.' The key is to notice your other symptoms. Endometriosis often causes pelvic and lower back pain, as well as heavy periods and painful sex. UTI pain is often accompanied by a burning sensation when peeing, nausea or the need to use the loo a lot. Take paracetamol or ibuprofen to ease the pain, but if your symptoms don't improve after several days, or if they suddenly worsen or you develop a temperature, see your GP.

2 TO 5 O'CLOCK

'Pain in this quarter of your tummy is usually due to constipation,' says Dr Lynch. You'll feel sluggish with a dull ache and probably bloating, too. It's normally caused by drinking too little water or not eating enough fibre. 'Pregnancy hormones can also cause constipation with about 40% of pregnant women suffering,' he adds. Try taking fibre supplements, drink at least eight glasses of water a day and avoid codeine-based painkillers. 'See your GP if you experience these symptoms for longer than a week out of every month, you pass blood or start to lose weight quickly with no explanation,' he says.