Innovative GI

Understanding & Managing Functional Dyspepsia

A Patient Guide to Chronic Indigestion

What Is Functional Dyspepsia?

Functional dyspepsia is chronic or recurring upper-abdominal discomfort — pain, burning, uncomfortable fullness after eating, or feeling full too quickly — without an ulcer, cancer, or other structural problem found on endoscopy or imaging to explain it. It's extremely common, affecting roughly 1 in 10 people at some point, and is generally grouped into two overlapping patterns: **postprandial distress syndrome** (fullness and early satiety centered around meals) and **epigastric pain syndrome** (pain or burning that isn't necessarily tied to eating). Many patients have features of both.

What's Happening in the Gut

Functional dyspepsia isn't "in your head," and it isn't just one thing — research points to several overlapping mechanisms, often in combination:

- **The stomach doesn't relax normally after eating.** Normally, the upper stomach stretches to make room for a meal. In functional dyspepsia, this stretching response is often blunted, so the stomach fills up and feels full or uncomfortable faster than it should.
- **Food moves through the stomach more slowly than normal** in some patients, prolonging fullness and bloating after meals.
- **The stomach and upper gut are more sensitive than normal** to ordinary stretching, acid, or certain nutrients (especially fat) — so sensations that wouldn't bother most people register as pain or discomfort.
- **Low-grade inflammation in the duodenum** (the first part of the small intestine) — some patients have slightly elevated immune cells there on biopsy, possibly triggered by a prior stomach bug, allergy-type response, or changes in gut bacteria.
- **H. pylori infection** — a common stomach bacterium that can cause low-grade inflammation and drive symptoms in a subset of patients.
- **Brain-gut signaling and stress.** The gut and brain communicate constantly in both directions; stress and anxiety can amplify how strongly normal gut sensations are perceived, which is part of why therapies that work on this signaling pathway (discussed below) can help even though they aren't traditional digestive medications.

How Functional Dyspepsia Is Treated

Because several different mechanisms can drive symptoms, treatment is often a process of trying a few evidence-based options to see what helps you specifically — there's rarely a single fix. A few terms come up often below: a study "compared to a dummy pill (placebo)" means some patients got the real treatment and others a fake version, without knowing which, so researchers could tell whether the treatment itself was really working — this matters more than usual here, because the placebo response in functional dyspepsia trials is unusually high. A "pooled analysis" or study that "combines" several trials means researchers combined data from multiple separate studies for a more reliable answer.

Testing for H. Pylori & Acid-Suppressing Medication

Goal: address the two best-established, first-line drivers of dyspepsia symptoms.

• **Testing for H. pylori** (via breath, stool, or biopsy) **and treating it if positive** — typically a 1–2 week course combining antibiotics with an acid-suppressing medication.

Evidence: A pooled analysis of over 5,000 patients found curing an H. pylori infection improved symptoms significantly more often than comparison treatments — for roughly 1 in every 9 to 14 patients treated, curing the infection was what resolved their symptoms. This is considered the strongest, best-established first step, and current GI guidelines recommend testing for it in anyone under 60 with these symptoms.

• **Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs)** — e.g., omeprazole, pantoprazole; taken once daily.

Evidence: Consistently outperform a dummy pill across many trials, especially when burning or acid-like discomfort is the main complaint rather than fullness or bloating. The size of the benefit is modest — a meaningful share of the improvement in trials comes from the placebo response, which is unusually strong in this condition — but PPIs remain a reasonable, low-risk first or second step.

• **H2 blockers** (e.g., famotidine) — an alternative to PPIs, especially for milder or intermittent symptoms.

Evidence: Less extensively studied specifically for functional dyspepsia than PPIs, but a reasonable option if PPIs aren't tolerated or aren't fully effective.

Herbal & Dietary Therapies

Goal: reduce symptoms through low-risk botanical and dietary approaches.

• **Iberogast (STW5)** — a combination herbal extract (including bitter candytuft, chamomile, peppermint, and other botanicals), taken as liquid drops with or before meals.

Evidence: One of the better-studied herbal options for this condition. Several placebo-controlled trials, and a pooled analysis combining them, found it significantly reduced symptom severity compared to a dummy pill, with one head-to-head trial showing effects similar in size to a standard prokinetic medication. Generally well tolerated.

• **Ginger** — as a supplement, tea, or extract, typically taken before meals.

Evidence: Speeds up stomach emptying and, in placebo-controlled trials specifically in functional dyspepsia patients, meaningfully improved fullness, bloating, and related symptoms compared to a dummy pill. It's one of the more consistently positive natural options we discuss, though it's worth noting the individual trials are still relatively small, so we'd call this good, not yet definitive, evidence.

• **Peppermint oil and caraway oil combination** (enteric-coated capsules, taken before meals; sold under various brand names) — not the same product as Iberogast, though it shares some overlapping ingredients.

Evidence: A pooled analysis of 5 trials (580 patients total) found this combination significantly reduced pain and improved overall symptoms compared to a dummy pill, with results comparable to a standard prokinetic in one trial. The evidence is rated low-to-moderate quality, since trials were small and only ran about 4 weeks, but the safety profile is favorable.

• **Mediterranean-style eating pattern** — vegetables, fruit, legumes, whole grains, olive oil, moderate fish, less red meat and processed food.

Evidence: A systematic review found people who closely followed this pattern had significantly lower odds of functional dyspepsia than those who didn't (roughly 60% lower odds in the comparison). This is mostly observational evidence — showing an association rather than proof that changing your diet will resolve symptoms — but the pattern carries broad health benefits regardless.

• **Smaller, more frequent, lower-fat meals.**

Evidence: Standard first-line dietary advice based on how functional dyspepsia works mechanically — large or fatty meals ask more of a stomach that already has trouble relaxing and emptying normally. Not tested in large dedicated trials, but low-risk and consistent with the underlying physiology.

A Note on Prokinetic Medications

Prokinetics are medications that speed up stomach emptying, and you may see them mentioned elsewhere for dyspepsia. We generally don't recommend **metoclopramide** for this condition: it carries an FDA black-box warning for a movement disorder (tardive dyskinesia) with longer-term use, and safer options above are typically tried first. **Domperidone** works similarly but isn't FDA-approved in the U.S. and requires heart-rhythm monitoring; it's something to discuss with your doctor rather than obtain independently, and isn't something we'd start without that oversight.

Gut-Brain Neuromodulators

Goal: calm pain signaling and gut sensitivity, or improve the stomach's ability to relax and accommodate a meal — especially for symptoms that don't respond to the steps above.

• **Low-dose tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs)** — e.g., amitriptyline or nortriptyline, at doses much lower than used for depression, taken at bedtime.

Evidence: A large NIH-funded trial randomized patients to amitriptyline, a different antidepressant (escitalopram), or a dummy pill: about 53% of patients on amitriptyline improved for at least 5 weeks, versus about 40% on the dummy pill and 38% on escitalopram. It worked best in patients whose main symptom was pain rather than fullness, and notably didn't work by speeding up stomach emptying — its benefit appears to come from calming pain signaling between the gut and brain rather than a direct digestive effect.

• **Mirtazapine (Remeron)** — an antidepressant that also stimulates appetite and reduces gut sensitivity, typically dosed at bedtime.

Evidence: A randomized, dummy-pill-controlled trial in patients with functional dyspepsia and weight loss found mirtazapine significantly improved early fullness, nutrient tolerance, quality of life, and weight compared to placebo. Especially useful for patients whose dyspepsia comes with reduced appetite or weight loss, given its appetite-stimulating effect.

• **Buspirone** — typically used for anxiety, but also relaxes the upper stomach; dosed several times daily before meals for this purpose.

Evidence: A small placebo-controlled crossover trial found buspirone significantly reduced fullness, early satiety, and bloating, and directly measured an increased ability of the stomach to stretch and accommodate a meal, compared to a dummy pill. A promising, mechanism-based option, though based on a small trial (17 patients) so far.

Psychological Therapies

Goal: directly retrain gut-brain signaling using structured, evidence-based talk therapy.

• **Gut-directed hypnotherapy or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** — structured, GI-specific therapies aimed at gut-brain communication, not general counseling; available in-person, and increasingly through app- or phone-based programs.

Evidence: Multiple randomized trials (roughly 8 trials, 464 patients combined, across functional GI conditions including dyspepsia) found these therapies produced real, lasting symptom improvement — comparable in size to medication in some studies — with added benefits for mood and quality of life. Among the better-supported non-drug options for this condition overall.

When to Contact Our Office

- Unintentional weight loss, persistent vomiting, or difficulty/pain with swallowing
- Vomiting blood or coffee-ground material, or unexplained anemia found on labs
- New symptoms starting after age 60, or a family history of stomach or esophageal cancer
- Before starting, stopping, or combining any medication or supplement in this guide, especially if you take other medications

This guide supports your personalized plan and isn't a substitute for individualized medical advice. Check with your provider before starting, stopping, or combining anything mentioned here.

Innovative GI • Cameron Sikavi, MD • 8631 W 3rd St, Suite 1015-E, Los Angeles, CA 90048 • (310) 652-4472 • innovativegi.com