Lupus Tummy Troubles and How to Cope With Them

by BRANDY OSTLER

Treating Lupus Stomach Pain

Lupus can attack any body system, and the gastrointestinal tract is no different. Your tummy troubles may very well be a side-effect of lupus.

The Lupus Foundation of America explains how lupus can affect the GI system as well as surrounding organs such as the liver, pancreas, and gallbladder. Many of the issues you are experiencing may be the result of medications or additional disorders.

However, when tummy troubles arise, the underlying reason may be the furthest thing from your mind — at least that is true in my case. Sure, I want to know what's causing the problem, but I'm more interested in finding some relief!

I have found that my tummy troubles can last for days. It's uncomfortable and annoying.

What causes it? Is there anything I can do to avoid it? How can I find relief? These are probably questions that have gone through your mind as well.

I'd like to shed some light from my experience, offer some potential answers, and hopefully help settle the stomach woes so many are faced with each day.

What Causes Tummy Troubles?

As with other lupus issues, many of the problems stem from inflammation in the body. I often have trouble swallowing or experience the dreaded acid reflux condition due to inflammation in the esophagus.

On more than one occasion I have felt the uncomfortable sensation of food getting 'stuck' in my throat. It's unappetizing to say the least and usually results in vomiting anything I managed to take in.

Undoubtedly, my appetite ceases and any attempt to continue eating is generally unsuccessful. I have gone days without being able to ingest a full meal. This in itself can cause problems as proper nutrition is essential for maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

I have found that some food items cause the problem more than others — breads, pastas, chicken, asparagus, and even lettuce. I avoid certain foods I know are difficult to get down as much as possible, but when I do indulge, I take small bites and chew slowly and completely which has proven to help. Sure, I may be the last one eating at the dinner table, but it's well worth it if I can avoid the vomiting routine!

The burning sensation and often distastefulness of acid reflux is a common problem for many people. Inflammation in the esophagus or stomach can cause this backward flow, which if persistent, can lead to GERD.

Although antacids can be used and omeprazole is often prescribed (or purchased OTC), I like to avoid as many medications as I can in my daily regimen. I keep these on hand, but have found some natural remedies that work for me — either to tame the beast or prevent it from rearing its ugly head.

Finding Lupus Stomach Pain Relief

- **Milk:** When I initially feel the burn, I often drink a glass of milk to put out the fire. Milk is rich in calcium, which has shown to be effective and is often an ingredient in antacids. Although milk can temporarily buffer stomach acid, the fat content can actually stimulate the production of it, so sticking to low-fat or non-fat varieties is generally best.
- **Aloe:** If you have ever used aloe on a sunburn then you know it has burn easing properties. The same is true for heartburn! Aloe vera juice can reduce inflammation in the esophagus and stomach — but be careful, some varieties also contain laxative properties and you might find yourself trading one problem for another. Look for a brand that has the laxative component removed if this is a worry for you.
- **Ginger:** An age-old remedy for all kinds of tummy troubles, ginger is an anti-inflammatory. Steep in hot water to make tea or use it as an ingredient when cooking. If all else fails, you can even chew on a bit of ginger root to get in your daily dose. But be careful, too much ginger can actually cause heartburn. Limit your daily intake to about 3 grams.

- **Banana:** Bananas are believed to be natural antacids that can stop acid reflux from flaming. They neutralize acid in the stomach because they are rich in potassium, which is an alkalizing mineral. However, be sure the bananas are nice and ripe! For an even better effect, put sliced bananas on top of low-fat, high-fiber oatmeal which has stomach soothing properties.
- **Apple:** “An apple a day keeps the doctor away!” How true it is. Apples work to reduce reflux because they create an alkaline state in the stomach, neutralizing excess acids and aiding in digestion. Stick with sweet varieties such as red or golden delicious and avoid the tart varieties such as granny smith. In baked goods, applesauce can be used as a substitute for oil, which is a common heartburn trigger.
- **Gum:** Believe it or not, chewing gum after a meal can actually prevent acid reflux. Choose one that is sugar-free and chew for about 30 minutes. This stimulates the salivary glands, and increases the flow of saliva. Any acid that has built up in the stomach is diluted and washed away or cleared out more quickly, preventing symptoms from occurring.

If you know acid reflux is a problem for you, try to avoid common triggers such as caffeinated drinks (soda, tea, coffee), acidic foods (citrus, tomatoes), spicy foods (black pepper, garlic, onions), high-fat greasy foods (they stay in the stomach longer), alcohol (red wine), chocolate, and peppermint.

Next page: treating nausea and other lupus stomach issues.

Treating Nausea

Of course tummy troubles and GI issues don’t end there. If you are like me, you might be plagued with nausea more often than not. For me, it’s one of my biggest complaints.

There is nothing fun about always feeling sick. Sometimes it seems that I suffer endlessly and finding answers is not always easy. I know that much of the nausea is caused by the medications I take — and of course, I have other medications to ease the trouble like Zofran and Phenergan — but it’s usually not enough.

Acid reflux also contributes to nausea and I’ve found myself vomiting stomach acid more than once — YUCK! This is one of the reasons ginger is so beneficial. It has been used for years as a natural nausea remedy in addition to treating reflux.

A heating pad applied to your tummy and/or a cool compress or ice pack applied to the back of your neck can also help. Other options for treating nausea that you may find beneficial include:

- **Peppermint has been shown to alleviate nausea** – but since it is a heartburn trigger, ingesting it is not always the best option. Instead, I use essential peppermint oil (therapeutic grade) to ease my tummy. Because it is a 'hot' oil, diluting it in coconut oil is needed. Then, massage 1-3 drops on the mastoids behind the ear and over the navel. Do this hourly. You can also place a warm compress over the stomach after the oil is applied. Alternatively, you can directly inhale the oils 4-6 times per hour or as needed. I will often use my diffuser to aid in this process.
- **Acupuncture has been used for years by Eastern practitioners and has been shown to effectively combat nausea.** However, it's not likely you'll be able to run down to your nearest clinic to get an acupuncture treatment each time a bout of nausea comes on. Instead, learn how to appropriately apply acupressure.
- **Acupressure is an ancient form of healing that uses finger and hand pressure to stimulate key points on the body.** For treating nausea, the best known (and easiest to find) are the P6 points (Nei Kuan) that are located on your inner wrist. Approximately 2 or 3 finger widths down from the top crease in your wrist (at the base of your palm) there is a groove between two large tendons. Gently apply pressure to this area when you feel nauseous. Alternatively, there is quite a wide variety of 'nausea bands' available for purchase that function in the same way. If you choose bands, be sure to wear them correctly to gain relief. The pressure stud needs to align with the P6 point to properly stimulate the area and relieve your nausea.
- **The BRAT Diet can be a welcoming comfort when experiencing many bouts of nausea.** Sometimes, the yucky feeling can cause our appetites to fail. I have found myself going days without food because I feel so sick to my stomach. Lack of food can exasperate the problem. When it's consistent, this can be dangerous. Simply not eating is not a viable solution. Eating a diet of bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast can provide nourishment that is gentle to your tummy!

However, sometimes it's not the reflux or the nausea causing my tummy troubles but rather issues that most will find embarrassing in nature. That's right — the poo problem.

I know this topic is one we tend to avoid and I promise to tread lightly. As embarrassing as it may be, it cannot be ignored. Whether you can't go or you go too much, the poo problem is a reality for many who have stomach problems with lupus.

Just like Goldilocks, we might find ourselves dealing with a situation that is 'too hard' or 'too soft' and it is essential to find the 'just right' if relief is to be achieved. One possible problem may be irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Although this condition may not be directly linked to lupus, many who have lupus experience IBS. Basically this happens when muscles aren't moving waste through your intestines properly and you might find yourself with constipation or diarrhea.

Certainly you can turn to stool softeners, laxatives, or antidiarrheal products — but there are things you can do naturally to soothe your poo problems.

- **Too hard:** If constipation is the problem, eat a diet with plenty of fiber to help keep things moving — beans, broccoli, apricots, berries, and nuts are all good sources of fiber. A tablespoon of olive oil with a teaspoon of lemon juice is a wonderful way to stimulate your digestive system. A bit of flaxseed oil in orange juice will also do the trick, although it may take a few hours to kick in. Other options include molasses, coffee, or a bit of baking soda in water. Oh, and don't forget the prunes!
- **Too soft:** If you are suffering from diarrhea, keep yourself hydrated — but stick with clear liquids. A sports drink high in electrolytes is a good choice if you happen to like them. This is also a great time to incorporate the BRAT diet. Yogurt with 'live cultures' help restore healthy levels of good bacteria to your intestines. Other than yogurt, avoid dairy products as much as possible. Drink some chamomile tea — chamomile is good for treating intestinal inflammation. Blueberries and starchy foods can also be your friend and help you avoid frequent visits to the potty room.

When you are suffering from stomach problems, keep track of what's going on. Severe abdominal pain can be a

sign of something more severe. Lupus vasculitis, inflammatory bowel disease, infection, pancreatitis, liver inflammation, or ascites are all serious complications and require medical attention.

Inevitably, the medications we take can cause tummy troubles. Although you should talk to your doctor first, it is a good idea to add a probiotic to your diet to help keep your tummy happy and healthy.