

What You Should Know About Gastrointestinal Bleeds

“GI” stands for “gastrointestinal.” The gastrointestinal system is the medical term for the organs in your body that process food. This system includes:

- Esophagus - the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach
- Stomach
- Small intestine (small bowel)
- Large intestine (large bowel or colon)
- Rectum

A GI bleed refers to a bleed in any of the organs of the GI system. Upper GI bleeds affect the esophagus, stomach, or first part of the small intestine. Lower GI bleeds affect the large intestine or rectum.

Because GI bleeds occur inside the body, it is not always easy to know when it is happening. Some people may not have any symptoms and will not know until an exam is performed. If symptoms are present, they may vary depending on location.

Symptoms of an upper GI bleed may include:

- Vomiting blood or something resembling coffee grounds
- Diarrhea or bowel movements that resemble black tar

Symptoms of a lower GI bleed may include:

- Bowel movements that look bloody

Symptoms that can happen with either upper GI bleed or lower GI bleed may include:

- Feeling weak, light-headed, or woozy
- Racing heartbeat
- Cramps or belly pain
- Diarrhea
- Pale skin

If any of the following occur, contact your doctor or nurse right away:

- Vomit blood or something resembling coffee grounds
- Have a bowel movement that looks like tar or has blood in it
- Feel weak, light-headed, or woozy
- Have a racing heartbeat
- Have severe belly pain
- Turn extremely pale

Updated April 2020