



# Understanding Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders in Contemporary Clinical Practice

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## DESCRIPTION

Functional gastrointestinal disorders are among the most common conditions encountered in gastroenterology and represent a major cause of chronic digestive symptoms worldwide. These disorders are defined by persistent and recurring gastrointestinal complaints that cannot be explained by structural, biochemical, or overt inflammatory abnormalities using routine diagnostic testing. Common examples include irritable bowel syndrome, functional dyspepsia, functional constipation and functional bloating. Although traditionally considered benign, functional gastrointestinal disorders impose a substantial burden on patients, healthcare systems and societies due to their chronicity, impact on quality of life and associated healthcare utilization.

The defining feature of functional gastrointestinal disorders is the presence of symptoms that arise from altered gastrointestinal function rather than identifiable organic disease. Patients may experience abdominal pain, bloating, altered bowel habits, early satiety, nausea, or discomfort that fluctuates over time. These symptoms are often exacerbated by stress, dietary factors and psychological comorbidities, reflecting the complex interaction between the gut and the brain. The absence of visible pathology has historically led to under recognition and stigmatization of these disorders, despite their very real physiological basis.

Advances in research have transformed the understanding of functional gastrointestinal disorders from purely psychosomatic conditions to disorders of gut brain interaction. Central to this concept is the bidirectional communication between the central nervous system and the enteric nervous system. Alterations in visceral sensitivity play

a key role, with many patients exhibiting heightened perception of normal gastrointestinal stimuli. This visceral hypersensitivity explains why normal digestive processes can be perceived as painful or uncomfortable. Changes in central pain processing and emotional regulation further amplify symptom perception.

Gastrointestinal motility abnormalities also contribute to symptom generation. In functional dyspepsia, impaired gastric accommodation and delayed gastric emptying may lead to early satiety and postprandial fullness. In irritable bowel syndrome, altered intestinal transit can result in diarrhoea, constipation, or mixed bowel habits. These motility changes are often subtle and variable, making them difficult to detect with standard diagnostic tools, yet they significantly influence symptom patterns.

The gut microbiota has emerged as an important factor in the pathophysiology of functional gastrointestinal disorders. Alterations in microbial composition and diversity can influence intestinal permeability, immune activation and fermentation processes, leading to gas production and bloating. Microbial metabolites also interact with the enteric nervous system and immune cells, affecting motility and visceral sensitivity. This has led to growing interest in microbiota directed therapies, including dietary modification, probiotics and antibiotics, as part of a personalized treatment approach.

Low grade immune activation and impaired mucosal barrier function are increasingly recognized in subsets of patients with functional gastrointestinal disorders. Increased numbers of immune cells and elevated levels of inflammatory mediators have been observed in the gut mucosa, particularly following gastrointestinal infections. This observation

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supports the concept of post infectious functional disorders and highlights the role of immune gut interactions in symptom persistence. These immune changes can sensitize enteric nerves and disrupt normal gut function without causing overt inflammation.

Psychological and social factors play a significant role in symptom expression and disease course. Anxiety, depression and stress related disorders are more prevalent among patients with functional gastrointestinal disorders and can exacerbate symptoms through neuroendocrine and autonomic pathways. Early life stress, adverse experiences and coping styles influence vulnerability and resilience. Importantly, psychological factors do not imply that symptoms are imagined, but rather that emotional and cognitive processes modulate gut function and symptom perception. Diagnosis of functional gastrointestinal disorders is based on symptom based criteria, such as the Rome criteria, after excluding alarm features that suggest organic disease. This positive diagnostic approach helps avoid unnecessary testing and reinforces the legitimacy of the diagnosis. Effective patient clinician communication is essential, as patient understanding and acceptance of the diagnosis strongly influence treatment outcomes. Reassurance, education and validation of symptoms form the foundation of management.

Treatment strategies for functional gastrointestinal disorders are multifaceted and tailored to individual symptom profiles and patient preferences. Dietary interventions, such as fiber modification or reduction of fermentable carbohydrates, can provide symptom relief for some patients. Pharmacological therapies target specific symptoms, including antispasmodics for pain, laxatives or secretagogues for constipation and neuromodulators for pain and visceral hypersensitivity. Psychological therapies, including cognitive behavioural therapy and gut directed hypnotherapy, have demonstrated efficacy and address the gut brain interaction at its core.

In conclusion, functional gastrointestinal disorders are complex, multifactorial conditions that arise from disordered interactions between the gut, brain, microbiota and immune system. They are highly prevalent and significantly affect quality of life, yet remain challenging to manage due to their heterogeneous nature. A modern understanding that integrates biological, psychological and social factors has improved diagnostic confidence and expanded therapeutic options. Continued research and patient centered care are essential to further reduce the burden of these disorders and to improve outcomes for affected individuals.