

Pancreatic Enzymes

Pancreatic enzymes are natural chemicals that help your body break down the fat, protein, and carbohydrates in foods. Normally, the pancreas produces these enzymes.

However, certain conditions, such as pancreatic cancer, ulcerative colitis, and celiac disease, may limit or stop your body's production of pancreatic enzymes. Some medical treatments (such as chemotherapy; radiation to the bowel; and surgery of the pancreas, stomach, or duodenum) may also harm the body's ability to produce pancreatic enzymes. Prescription pancreatic enzymes may be required in these situations.

What Is Fat Malabsorption?

When your pancreas does not produce enough enzymes on its own, or if you have a blockage that prevents your pancreas from secreting enzymes, your body may not be able to absorb fat from food as it normally would. This condition is known as **fat malabsorption**.

Symptoms of fat malabsorption include:

- Inability to gain weight
- Weight loss
- Fatigue
- Frequent, large, oily, floating stools

- Bloating and abdominal pressure after eating
- Cramping or pain after eating
- Seeing particles of undigested food in the toilet
- Stool that is light in color (yellow, tan, clay-colored, or white)
- Profuse, foul-smelling gas or flatus

Taking Pancreatic Enzymes

If your pancreas is not producing enough enzymes to digest fat, your doctor may prescribe pancreatic enzymes. Doses of enzymes are given in thousands of lipase units per capsule, with 4,000 lipase units needed to digest about 5 grams of fat. The dose you need will be based on your weight and how much fat you are consuming.

To ensure that pancreatic enzymes work as they should, follow these tips:

- Take pancreatic enzymes as directed with each meal or snack that contains fat. To work best, pancreatic enzymes need to be in your gut *with* food. Take the first capsule before or with the first bite of food. The enzymes do not work as well if you take them at the end of a meal.
- Do not open capsules and sprinkle the enzymes on food unless your doctor specifically tells you to do so.
- Let your health care provider know if you continue to have symptoms of fat malabsorption. You may need a different form of pancreatic enzyme, a different dose, or additional medications.
- You do not need to take pancreatic enzymes with fat-free foods. If you are unsure how to know whether a food contains fat, ask your registered dietitian (RD) or doctor for advice.