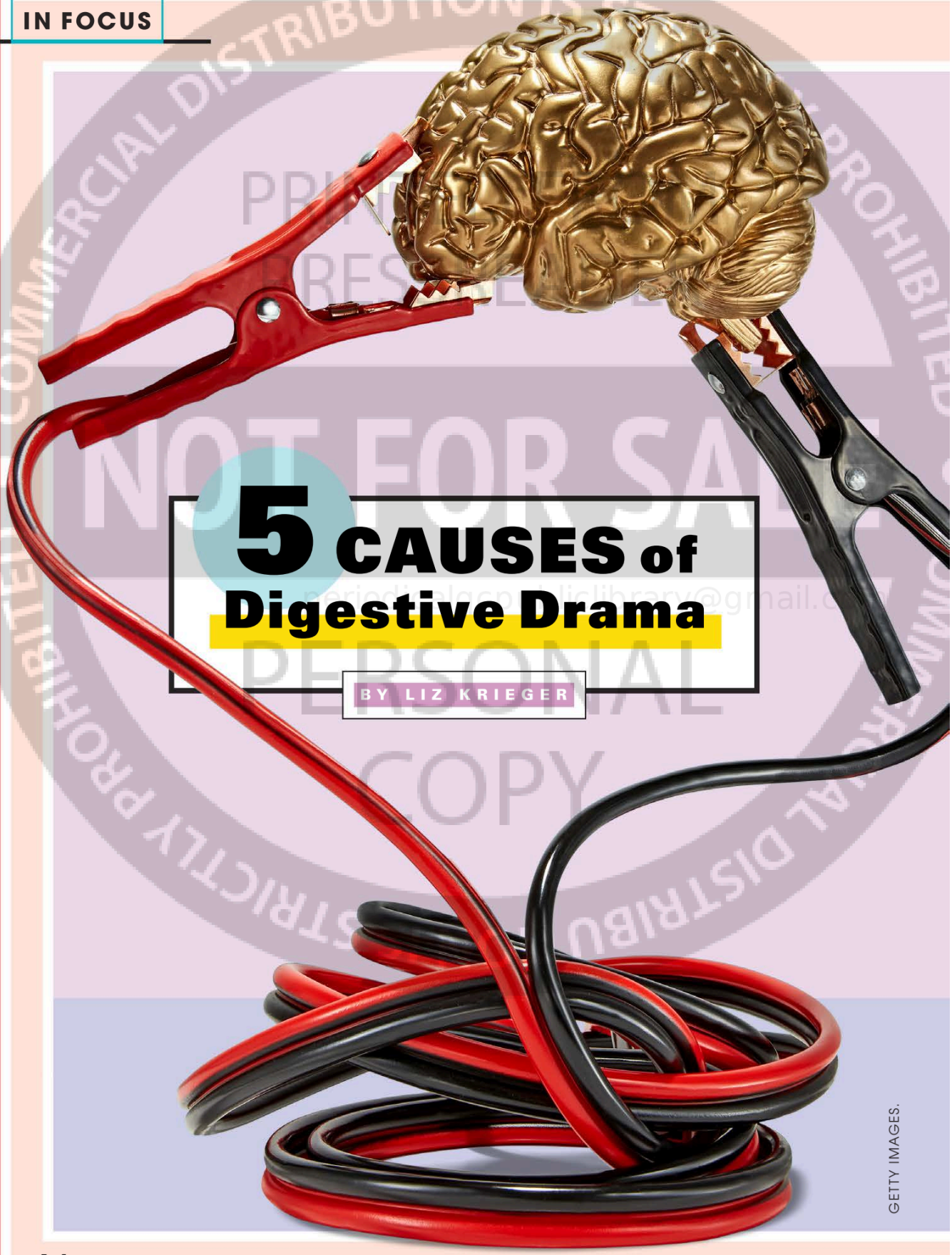
- Digestion

IN FOCUS



5 CAUSES of Digestive Drama

BY LIZ KRIEGER

GETTY IMAGES.

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IF YOU HAVE A STOMACH (WHICH WE HOPE YOU DO), you know that it can be sensitive, and it lets you know how it feels with constipation, diarrhea, cramping, and other fun stuff. Below, some of the culprits.



1 YOUR MIND

Know how your stomach can act up when you're nervous? "Like a direct Internet connection from your head to your gut, the vagus nerve runs from the brain through the abdomen," says Shanti Eswaran, M.D., a professor of gastroenterology at the University of Michigan. "So if something is going on in your brain, that nerve can be affected," causing bowel changes (diarrhea or constipation) and a more sensitive gut.

THE FIX: Do what lowers stress, like meditation or exercise; if emotions are a big cause of the problem, cognitive behavioral therapy or antidepressants can help.

2 TRAVEL

Racing to get to the gate, new-to-you foods, not taking in enough liquids, a change in routine, and the sedentary nature of travel slow down your GI tract. The result can be constipation.

THE FIX: Move as much as possible, drink lots of water, and go easy on alcohol, which can be dehydrating. To ease symptoms, take 200 mg to 400 mg of magnesium citrate a day, says Vincent Pedre, M.D., author of *The GutSmart Protocol*. It attracts water to the colon, keeping things moving.

3 ANTIBIOTICS

Medicine you take to fend off an infection can sometimes leave your gut depleted of the "good" bacteria it once had, rendering you susceptible to "bad" bacteria creeping in, says Dr. South. This can lead to diarrhea.

THE FIX: Eat high-fiber foods, which the healthy bacteria in your gut feed on; this can help them flourish. While many people pop a probiotic supplement as soon as they get a Z-Pak, there's not a ton of science to back up the idea that this helps, says Dr. South.

4 YOUR CYCLE

If you tend to get diarrhea when you have your period, it's no coincidence. Prostaglandin hormones can trigger muscular activity in your intestines, says Mary Jane Minkin, M.D., a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Yale School of Medicine.

THE FIX: If it's a big problem, ask your doc about taking birth

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control pills, which prevent ovulation. You can also try ibuprofen, which blocks the production of more prostaglandins, says Dr. Minkin.

5 COFFEE

If you start the morning with a cup or more, the stimulant acts in two ways—and quickly. It speeds up the GI tract overall, Dr. Eswaran says. But it also causes rectal hypersensitivity, leading in some people to contractions and then to a hasty search for a restroom.

THE FIX: Time your coffee right, and be aware that for some people any very hot or very cold beverage can trigger a bowel movement, she says.

MIKE GARTEN.

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Call the Doc If You Have...



UNEXPLAINED BLOATING OR PELVIC PAIN

In rare cases, this could signal ovarian cancer, especially if you feel full after eating very little, says Dr. Minkin. Bloating with frequent tummy pain and diarrhea might be due to an inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) such as ulcerative colitis.

BLOODY STOOLS

It may be a hemorrhoid, says Dr. South, but always bring this up with your M.D. Blood could be a sign of IBD or be caused by a growth or tumor.

PALE POOP

In general, your stool should have some green, yellow, or brown in it, says Dr. South. If it's grayish or super-light, there could be a liver problem or a bile duct blockage.

UNEXPLAINED WEIGHT LOSS

This could signify a range of things, including celiac disease, says Brigid Boland, M.D., an associate professor and IBD expert at the University of California at San Diego. Other potential causes: Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, or, rarely, cancer of the colon, pancreas, or gallbladder.

PAIN IN YOUR LEFT TUMMY

Severe discomfort with a fever could mean diverticulitis, an infection in the large intestine. You may be given antibiotics, says Dr. Boland, and then start a diet rich in fiber.

TRUNK ARCHIVE.

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