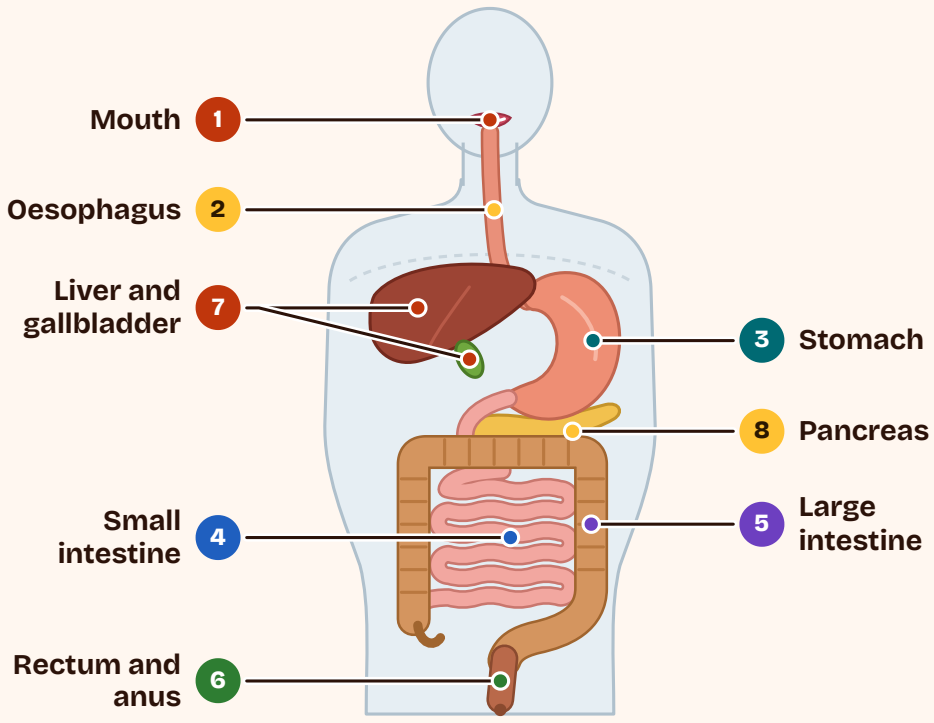
SCIENCE · BIOLOGY AGES 11–16

The Human Digestive System

Follow a meal through each organ as it is broken down into nutrients your body can absorb.



1 Mouth

Teeth grind food and saliva moistens it. The enzyme amylase in saliva starts breaking down starch.

2 Oesophagus

Waves of muscle contraction, called peristalsis, push each mouthful down to the stomach.

3 Stomach

Acid and the enzyme pepsin start digesting protein while muscles churn food into chyme.

4 Small intestine

Finishes digestion and absorbs most nutrients through millions of tiny villi.

5 Large intestine

Absorbs most of the remaining water and turns waste into solid stool.

6 Rectum and anus

The rectum holds stool until it leaves the body through the anus.

Helper organs

7 Liver and gallbladder

The liver makes bile to help digest fats. The gallbladder stores it and releases it at mealtimes.

8 Pancreas

Sends enzymes into the small intestine that break down carbohydrates, proteins and fats.

A cheese sandwich's journey

Saliva starts on the starch in the bread. The stomach usually empties in 2–4 hours; the food then spends 3–5 hours in the small intestine, where most nutrients are absorbed.

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