WHAT IS STEATORRHOEA?

Steatorrhoea refers to an increase in faecal fat content. This results in the production of pale, foul-smelling and oily stools that are difficult to flush. There is currently no precise standardised definition of the amount of fat excretion necessary to make the diagnosis of steatorrhoea, however fat excretion of more than 6g per day is considered abnormal. Diagnosis relies on investigation of the fat content of stools.

Poor absorption of fat can be a result of both digestive and absorptive disorders. Normally dietary fat (mostly triglycerides) gets broken down in the duodenum and small intestine by enzymes. Bile also helps in the digestive and absorption process by dividing fat into very small globules coated with bile acids, called micelles. This aids the absorption and transport of the fats across the lining of the small intestine so the fats can be absorbed. Disruption in any of these processes can lead to poor absorption of fats which means dietary fat stays within the bowel to be later excreted in the stools in increased amounts. Causes include:

- **Coeliac disease**: When foods containing gluten are eaten, a reaction occurs that damages the lining of the small intestine. This impairs absorption of fat and other substances.

- **Tropical sprue**: The most common cause of steatorrhoea worldwide. Occurs in many parts of Asia and may be seen in travellers to these areas. The exact cause is not known but it is thought to result in damage to intestinal villi which leads to poor fat absorption.

- **Chronic pancreatitis**: This causes a reduction in the production of the pancreatic enzymes which are required for adequate fat digestion.

- **Liver disease**: Obstruction of bile ducts inhibit bile entering the duodenum so lipids cannot be digested or absorbed.

- **Bacterial overgrowth**: Can occur spontaneously in elderly patients. The abnormal bacteria can breakdown bile salts.

- **Pancreatic cancer**: This can cause poor fat absorption by inhibiting function of the pancreas.

- **Crohn’s disease**: Causes damage to the ileum (final portion of the small intestine) that has important roles in absorption of bile acids and other substances.

- **Cystic fibrosis**: This is a genetic condition that causes abnormal secretions in various organs throughout the body. In the pancreas, mucus plugs block some of the ducts and inhibit the secretion of digestive juices by the pancreas.

**Symptoms**: Foul-smelling faeces, bulky stool, pale stools, loose stools, greasy stools.