Q I have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and have been told to try aloe vera, but someone said it can cause loose bowels. Is this true? Are there other side-effects? P O Aston

Aloe vera gel is often helpful for IBS as it contains soapy substances (saponins) that cleanse the bowel, pulpy microfibres (lignins) that absorb fluid and toxins and bulk up the motions and it also has a soothing action.

Many pure aloe drinks contain a substance called aloin. Aloin has a powerful laxative action which can, of course, be beneficial and usually works within eight to 12 hours.

Not everyone using Aloe wants this effect, however, and therefore select products that are labelled as aloin-free. Some of these products are being investigated by Trading Standards officers, however.

Best advice is to start off with a small dose (eg 15ml to 30ml) and to slowly increase this, if necessary, depending on how you respond.

Aloe vera should not be consumed during pregnancy (there is a possible increased risk of miscarriage) or when breast-feeding.

Q A friend is waiting for surgery for a hiatus hernia. What does this involve? FM Birmingham.

A If medical treatments to suppress acid secretion do not improve symptoms of hiatus hernia, the condition may be surgically corrected in an operation known as fundoplication. This can often be performed through keyhole surgery (laparoscopy) rather than needing a traditional larger scar.

During the op, the part of the stomach that has slipped up into the chest through the diaphragm is brought back down into its normal position. The upper few centimetres of the stomach is then wrapped around the lower oesophagus to produce a new valve. You usually need to stay in hospital for two or three days.

The Digestive Disorders Foundation produce factsheets on hiatus hernia and on fundoplication. Send a sae stating which sheet you require to PO Box 251, Edgware, Middlesex HA8 6HG.

Q My doctor thinks I have gallstones and is sending me for an endoscopy. I don't think I could swallow a large tube with a camera on the end. Is there any other test I could have?