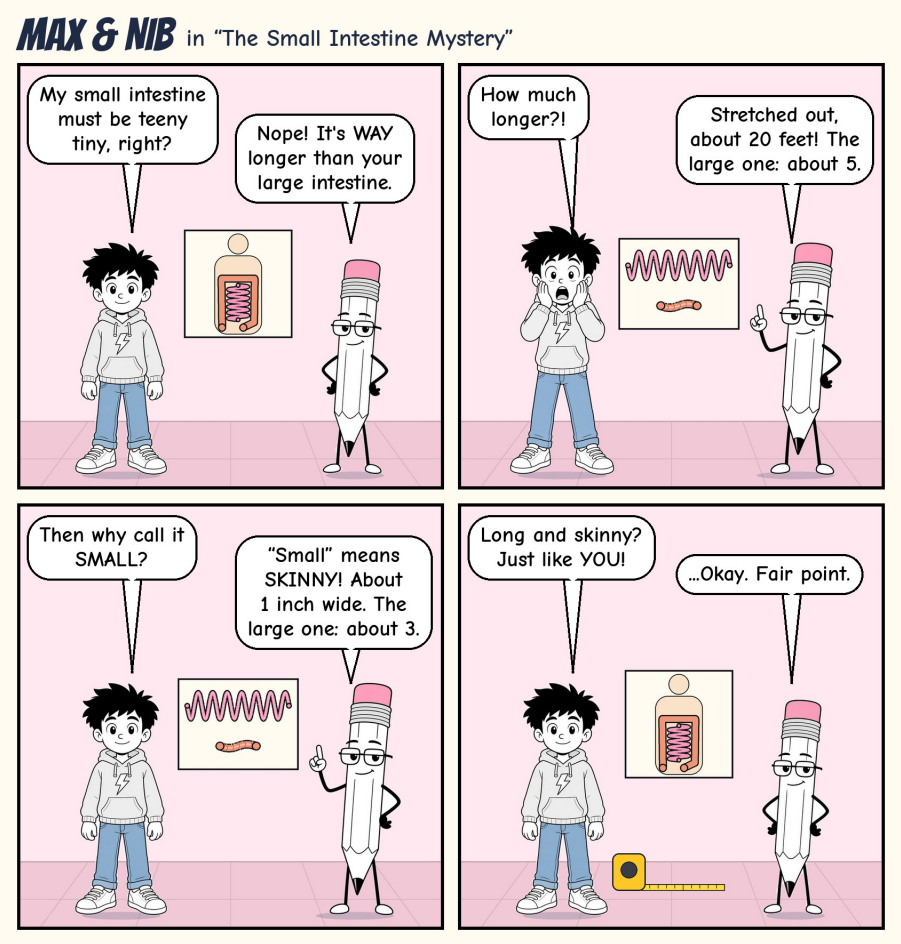


Name: _____ Date: _____

Why Is the Small Intestine Called Small?

Human Body · Grades 3–6 · About 15 minutes · Max & Nib

Cool facts

After you swallow, food travels from your stomach into a long, bendy tube called the small intestine. Its name tricks a lot of people. The small intestine is not short at all! Stretched out, a grown-up's small intestine is about 20 feet long. That is longer than a car. The large intestine, which comes next, is only about 5 feet long. So why is the long one called small? Because it is skinny. The small intestine is about 1 inch wide, and the large intestine is about 3 inches wide. Your body keeps all that tube neatly folded up inside your belly. In a living body, muscles keep the small intestine squeezed shorter, about 10 feet, but it is still the longer one. The small intestine is where most of the good stuff from your food, called nutrients, soaks into your blood.

Questions

1. Which is longer, the small intestine or the large intestine?

2. Stretched out, about how long is a grown-up's small intestine?

3. If the small intestine is so long, why is it called “small”?

4. The small intestine is about 20 feet long. The large intestine is about 5 feet long. How many times longer is the small intestine?

Show your work

Write about it

Invent a better name for the small intestine. Explain why your new name fits.

Word Record **Villi** are tiny, finger-like bumps that cover the inside of the small intestine. They give it a huge surface for soaking up nutrients. (OpenStax)

Word Record **Peristalsis** is the wave of muscle squeezes that pushes food along your intestines. (OpenStax)



Why Is the Small Intestine Called Small? — Answer Key

Grades 3–6 · For teacher or parent use

Answers

1. Which is longer, the small intestine or the large intestine?

   The small intestine.

2. Stretched out, about how long is a grown-up's small intestine?

   About 20 feet.

3. If the small intestine is so long, why is it called “small”?

   Because it is narrow (skinny). It is about 1 inch wide, while the large intestine is about 3 inches wide.

4. The small intestine is about 20 feet long. The large intestine is about 5 feet long. How many times longer is the small intestine?

   About 4 times longer (20 ÷ 5 = 4).

Writing prompt: Invent a better name for the small intestine. Explain why your new name fits.
Accept any reasoned name for the writing prompt (for example, “the long skinny intestine”). For adults: OpenStax gives about 10 feet (3.05 m) in a living person and about twice that after death, when muscle tone is lost; NIH StatPearls gives an average adult length of about 22 feet (7 m); the American College of Gastroenterology gives 20 feet long and about 1 inch in diameter for the small intestine, and 5 feet long and 3 inches in diameter for the large intestine. Lengths vary from person to person, so the sheet uses “about.”

Sources

- OpenStax (Rice University), Anatomy and Physiology 2e: The Small and Large Intestines — https://openstax.org/books/anatomy-and-physiology-2e/pages/23-5-the-small-and-large-intestines
- NIH StatPearls: Physiology, Small Bowel — https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK532263/
- American College of Gastroenterology: Capsule Endoscopy — https://gi.org/topics/capsule-endoscopy/

Cool Fact The small intestine soaks up about **95%** of the nutrients from your food. (NIH StatPearls)

Cool Fact The large intestine's main job is soaking up **water** and salts from leftover food. (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh)

Cool Fact A meal can take up to about **5 hours** to travel all the way through the small intestine. (NIH StatPearls)