



Heart burn or GERD (reflux)? What to do or not to do?

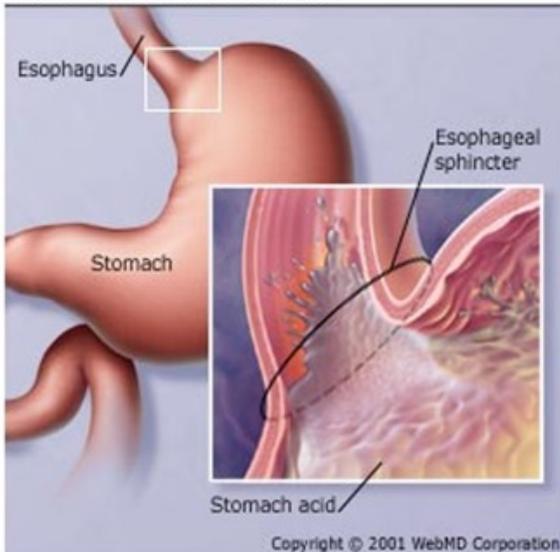
The terms “heartburn” and “GERD” are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. Heartburn (that burning feeling in the chest) is actually a symptom of GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). Having heartburn occasionally does not mean you have a medical problem. But if you need to take over the counter remedies more than twice a week, talk to your physician as it may be a sign of GERD.



Other symptoms of GERD include a feeling of food or drink coming back up into the mouth, damage to tooth enamel from acid, chest pain, and trouble swallowing. Long term effects of GERD can lead to Barrett's esophagus. This is a condition in which tissue that is similar to the lining of your intestine replaces the tissue lining your esophagus. People with Barrett's esophagus may develop a rare cancer called esophageal adenocarcinoma.

The most important thing concerning heartburn is to realize the difference between when it's just an occasional annoyance and when you should see the doctor.

What Causes Heartburn



What causes reflux?

Reflux occurs when stomach acid irritates the sensitive lining of the esophagus. Most often, the cause is a weak or poorly working muscle sphincter that is located at the lower end of the esophagus. Increased pressure on the abdominal area often leads to reflux. Normally, the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), the muscle between the stomach and esophagus keeps higher pressure above the stomach which prevents the backwash of stomach acid. If the LES pressure decreases, reflux may occur.

You may have noticed more persistent heartburn as you've gotten older. One reason is the weakening of the LES muscles. When it is weak, acid can escape the stomach and get into the esophagus, causing heartburn.

Weight gain is considered the number one cause of heartburn across all age groups and is the primary reason heartburn episodes increase in older adults. Medications for depression and high blood pressure can also cause heartburn. Having a hiatal hernia that pushes the stomach into the upper chest cavity can cause heartburn too.

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Actions to reduce episodes of heart burn and reflux

How you eat may be more important than what you eat.

- Eat slowly, take about 30 minutes to eat a meal.
- Chew foods well to make it easier to swallow. Don't "wash" down partially chewed foods with liquids.
- Try to sit down for all meals and snacks, not "grabbing" food on the run.
- Avoid getting too full. Give your body enough time to register a satisfied feeling in your stomach by eating slowly or by eating smaller meals more often. Try pausing mid-meal to check your level of satisfaction.
- Don't eat too close to bedtime. Allow 2-3 hours before bedtime for complete digestion.
- Sit upright for at least one hour after eating. If you can, move around or walk for 15 minutes after eating. Even getting up to wash dishes or do laundry helps.

What you eat is also important:

Determine what changes and restrictions to your diet work for you, since each person reacts in different ways to foods. If getting rid of a food does not affect your symptoms, there is no need to avoid it.

- Eat protein-rich foods in small amounts throughout the day or at least at each meal, rather than in one large meal. Lean proteins include chicken, turkey, tuna, tofu, lean beef and pork, low fat cheese, skim or 1% milk, dried beans.
- Choose whole-grain and high-fiber foods often.
- Limit high fat foods like fatty ground beef, marbled meats, sausage, hot dogs, brats, chicken wings, whole milk, chocolate, donuts, pastries, etc. Fat takes longer to digest and may worsen reflux.
- Avoid coffee (decaf and regular) and caffeinated tea, all carbonated drinks (with and without caffeine). The effect of decaf tea on reflux is unclear. Herbal teas are fine.
- Avoid alcohol, peppermint or spearmint candies, gums and liquors.
- Limit eating citrus fruits and juices, highly seasoned (garlic and onion or spicy) foods, as well as tomato products.
- Limit use of chewing gum and hard candies, as well as use of drinking fountains. This will decrease the amount of swallowed air which often leads to belching and reflux. Some people may find that chewing a non-mint flavored gum for 30 minutes after a meal increases saliva production and swallowing.



Other Lifestyle Tips:

- Avoid cigarettes, tobacco products or nicotine replacements.
- Plan some physical activity every day to help maintain good bowel function.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Avoid excessive weight gains and losses. Excess abdominal fat puts pressure on your stomach, making reflux worse.
- Elevate the head of your bed six to eight inches. Avoid reclining for up to three hours after a meal. Adding more pillows does not work, but a special foam wedge can be purchased.
- Try sleeping on your left side as it may reduce your reflux.
- Keeping a daily diary for a week can help you figure out which foods or habits cause symptoms. You can download a form at www.aboutgerd.org/library/download/7DD.



Avoid stress - According to some studies and surveys, stress may be another trigger for heartburn. Researchers think that stress may cause changes in the brain that turn up pain receptors, making you more sensitive to slight increases in acid levels. Stress can also deplete the production of prostaglandins, hormones that normally protect the stomach from the effects of acid. This could increase the perception of discomfort. Adopting coping techniques for managing stress in your life can also help reduce your risk of conditions like heart disease, stroke, obesity, irritable bowel syndrome, and depression. The better you deal with stress, the better you'll feel.

- Exercise helps loosen up tight muscles and releases natural, feel-good hormones.
- Get enough sleep as it is a natural stress reducer.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as guided imagery, yoga, tai chi, or listen to relaxing music.
- Learn to say no - prioritize people and activities.
- Laugh - watch a funny movie, read a joke book, laugh with others on the phone or in person.
- Spend time with your pet or get one as they can help calm and rejuvenate you.

Over-the-counter meds - Ask your doctor or pharmacist about over-the-counter medications that can help relieve heartburn like:

- Antacids, which help neutralize stomach acid, can provide quick relief.
- H-2-receptor antagonists (like Pepcid, Tagamet) can reduce stomach acid and provide longer relief but don't act as quickly as antacids.
- Proton pump inhibitors (like Prevacid 24HR, Nexium 24HR, and Prilosec OTC) also treats stomach acid.

If these meds don't work or you rely on them more than twice a week, see your doctor. You may need prescription meds and further testing to treat your condition.

Foods That Help Prevent Acid Reflux

High-fiber foods make you feel full so you may not overeat, which may help avoid heartburn. Include whole grains, vegetables like sweet potatoes, carrots, beets, asparagus, broccoli and green beans.

Watery foods can dilute and weaken stomach acid like celery, cucumber, lettuce, watermelon, broth-based soups, and herbal tea.

People with heartburn commonly reach for antacids, but these foods may provide relief from symptoms too:

Alkaline foods with higher pH include bananas, melons, cauliflower, fennel, and nuts.

Milk that's nonfat or low fat or low fat yogurt can act as a temporary buffer between the stomach lining and acidic stomach contents and provide some immediate relief of heartburn symptoms.

Ginger is one of the best digestive aids so sip some ginger tea when you feel heartburn coming on.

Apple cider vinegar is a remedy many people swear by. Put a small amount in warm water and drink it with meals.



Resources: University of Wisconsin Hospital System, Carolina Digestive Health Associates, 2020, Healthline, July 2017, Johns Hopkins Medicine, and Mayo Clinic.

Attention Seniors!

Call in to listen and speak to Les Rosenzweig, MS, RDN, CDN, Cooperative Extension Nutritionist to review the topic of Heartburn and GERD. Get answers to your questions on this and other nutrition topics.

Date: Thursday, December 17, 2020 11:00 am Call in number: 1-701-802-5149

Access code: 4706386# It cost about 10 cents for a 20 minute call.

Consumer-centered access for long-term care information, referrals and assessments.

For information, call 382-8481, #9, ext.304



NY Connects
Your Link to Long Term Services and Supports

Do you have questions or concerns about what to eat?

If you are participating in services offered by Schenectady County's Senior and Long Term Care services, request a free consultation with a Registered Dietitian.

Call Cornell Cooperative Extension, Schenectady County at 518-372-1622, ext. 269. Leave a message, if necessary, for dietitian to call you back.

Check out our website for nutrition resources:
<http://ccschenectady.org/nutrition-for-seniors>

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OFA- Heart burn or GERD December 2020