



A Heart-to-Heart About GERD

Chronic heartburn could be a more serious issue

If you experience some type of heartburn after eating fried or spicy foods, you're not alone. According to Scott Gelman, MD, medical director of the Center for Digestive Health at Morristown Medical Center, "An average of 20 percent of Americans have some reflux symptoms at some point. About half of those have more persistent symptoms that occur more than two or three times in a week."

Those experiencing a burning sensation in the chest (heartburn), regurgitation of food or liquid (acid reflux), difficulty swallowing or a dry cough may have a more serious condition called gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Dr. Gelman explained that the sphincter muscle at the bottom of the esophagus normally relaxes and closes throughout the day. "For people having reflux, that is happening more frequently. When the sphincter muscle is relaxed and open, then the acidic content from the stomach can reflux, or come back up into the esophagus, causing GERD symptoms."

HEALTHY HABITS MATTER

Dr. Gelman says that dietary and lifestyle habits can worsen GERD. "Things that can precipitate it include caffeine, alcohol, fatty foods, citrus or peppermint. Obesity and smoking are risk factors for GERD." Over time, chronic reflux can cause damage to the lining of the esophagus, leading to Barrett's esophagus, a precancerous condition. Doctors primarily diagnose GERD based upon symptoms, but patients may need an upper endoscopy to evaluate the degree of reflux. Other

testing, such as the use of a pH monitor, may be used to test the pH levels within the esophagus.

EFFECTIVE TREATMENTS

GERD is treated with a variety of medications, including over-the-counter antacids as well as H2 receptor blockers such as Zantac or Pepcid. Proton pump inhibitors, such as Prilosec and Nexium, are stronger blockers of acid that allow time for the esophagus to heal. According to Dr. Gelman, "It's very easy to self-treat, so it's important to seek medical attention if your symptoms are chronic. Warning signs would be difficulty swallowing, having black or tarry stools, or losing weight without trying. Those are considered alarm symptoms that should be brought to the attention of a doctor." ▶

For more information, please visit atlantichhealth.org/digestivehealth. For a referral to a GI physician, you may also contact your primary care provider.

ATLANTIC MEDICAL GROUP

Dr. Gelman is part of Atlantic Medical Group, a multispecialty network of health care providers. For more information, visit atlanticmedicalgroupnj.org.