

Heartburn and Reflux

Almost everyone suffers daily from some measure of heartburn. Heartburn occurs when stomach acid comes back up into the esophagus [the food pipe that carries food to the stomach] causing a burning sensation felt behind the breastbone and sometimes in the throat and neck. You can also have regurgitation of food and bitter-tasting stomach acid often referred to as reflux. Constant exposure to stomach acid can cause irritation of the lower lining of the esophagus as well as other medical problems.

WHAT CAUSES HEARTBURN?

The esophagus carries food and liquids to the stomach. There is a valve between the stomach and esophagus called the lower esophageal sphincter [LES]. A sphincter is a circular muscle that should remain closed except to allow food and liquids to enter the stomach. Reflux occurs when this muscle does not work properly. There are many factors cause increased pressure on the LES muscle leading to heartburn and reflux. The most common cause is eating a large meal.

Other causes are:

Nicotine	Fried or fatty foods
Chocolate	Coffee
Peppermint	Citrus fruits and juices
Pregnancy	Lying flat [particularly after eating]
Hiatus Hernia	Certain prescriptions drugs

COMPLICATIONS

Complications can occur when heartburn and reflux go untreated. Some major problems that can occur are:

Ulcers and bleeding	Inflammation of esophagus lining
Anemia	Esophageal stricture
Laryngitis and Hoarseness	Lung problems [wheezing,
Chronic Cough	bronchitis, pneumonia]

TREATMENT

Treatment is aimed at reducing reflux and damage to the lining of the esophagus as well as avoiding associated complications. Initial treatment involves lifestyle changes. General measures

that you can take to reduce reflux are:

Eat smaller and more frequent meals.

Avoid eating anything within three hours before bedtime.

Stop smoking. Nicotine in the blood can weaken the LES.

Avoid excessive bending, lifting, abdominal exercises, girdles and tight belts, all of which increase abdominal pressure and increases episodes of reflux.

Eliminate or significantly reduce consumption of fatty foods, citrus fruits and juices, tomato products, onions, pepper seasoning, alcohol, coffee, chocolate, and peppermint.

Lose weight if overweight. This may relieve upward pressure on the stomach and the LES.

Elevate the head of the bed or mattress 6 to 8 inches. This helps to keep the acid in the stomach by gravity when sleeping. You need to elevate your upper body [not just your head] to reduce episodes of reflux. You may achieve this by placing a wedge or extra pillow under the upper part of the mattress.

Review all medications with the physician. Certain drugs can weaken the LES.

[Levsin, Librax, Bentlyl, Procardia, Cardizem, Calan, Isoptin, Elavil, Doxepin and others]

Other treatments include:

Antacids: These can and should be used often. Generally, you should take antacids 30 to 60 minutes after eating and at bedtime.

Drugs: Medicines are now available to reduce stomach acid. These include Pepcid, Zantac, Tagamet, and Axid. Newer medicines such as Prevacid and Prilosec can almost eliminate stomach acid production. Other drugs, such as Propulsid and Reglan tighten the LES.

If heartburn is persistent, it needs to be evaluated, and long-term follow up care is often required. Medical treatment is usually very effective and can prevent complications. For the few patients for whom medical treatment does not work, surgery may be a successful alternative