

HEARTBURN (GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE; GERD)

Gastroesophageal reflux disease, or heartburn, refers to the backward flow of acid-containing stomach contents into the bottom part of the *esophagus*, the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach. About 1 out of every 3 Americans suffers from heartburn at least occasionally. The small muscle (*sphincter*), located where the esophagus meets the stomach, normally stays *contracted* (closed) except when food is swallowed. It then relaxes and allows the food to pass into the stomach. If the sphincter relaxes at other times, stomach contents, including stomach acids, move into the esophagus. Some common triggers of this sphincter relaxation are increased pressure on the abdomen, certain food products including caffeine, chocolate, fatty foods, and peppermint; alcohol; birth control pills and some other medications; and smoking. Constrictive clothing, especially at the waist; overeating, pregnancy, or obesity may also cause increased pressure on the abdomen.

Symptoms may include:

Symptoms often occur right after a meal and are often worse when you lie down, bend over, or exercise

- A dull ache or burning discomfort in the chest
- A burning feeling in the upper abdomen and throat
- An unpleasant taste in the mouth
- Painful swallowing

What your doctor can do:

- If self-treatment as below is not effective or heartburn is severe, medication may be prescribed to help decrease stomach acid or to prevent sphincter relaxation.

What you can do:

- Avoid those foods or medications that make heartburn worse.
- Talk with your doctor about alternatives to any prescription medicines that may be causing a problem.
- Try to eat several small meals a day rather than a large meal all at once
- Avoid eating anything within 2 hours of bedtime.
- Stop smoking, avoid alcohol, and lose weight if necessary.
- If heartburn is very severe, you can elevate the head 3 to 4 inches of your bed to prevent stomach acid from flowing backward when lying down.
- Antacids, taken as directed, can help neutralize stomach acid.

What you can expect:

- Heartburn that continues for a long time can cause damage to the esophagus and pain with swallowing.
- There have been cases of serious damage to the esophagus which required surgery, but this is not very common.

Contact your doctor, if the heartburn persists despite having treatment, if you vomit blood, or if your pain worsens.