

HEARTBURN

(Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease [GERD])



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Discomfort in the upper digestive tract. Heartburn (also known as acid indigestion or gastroesophageal reflux disease [GERD]) is a symptom, not a disease, and has nothing to do with the heart. It can affect all ages, but most common in adults over 60. The symptoms are often mistaken for a heart attack.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Belching or slight regurgitation of stomach contents into the mouth, producing an acid taste.
- Heavy, burning or uncomfortable sensation in the chest.
- Swallowing difficulty.
- Mild abdominal pain or bloated feeling.
- Vomiting (rarely).

CAUSES

Heartburn is not associated with a heart disorder. It is caused by a backflow of acid from the stomach into the esophagus. The muscles that close off the upper stomach become lax, allowing stomach juices to enter the esophagus and irritate its lining.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Hiatal hernia (part of stomach protrudes into the chest).
- Ulcers of the esophagus.
- Stress.
- Improper diet; overeating.
- Obesity.
- Smoking.
- Excess alcohol consumption.
- Use of drugs, such as aspirin, arthritis medicine or cortisone.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Avoid smoking and overindulging in food or alcohol.
- Reduce the amount of fats, deep-fried foods, spices, coffee, tea, and tomato products in your diet.
- Don't bend over, lie down or exercise immediately after eating.
- Don't wear tight, restrictive clothing.
- Elevate the head of the bed 4 to 6 inches with blocks.
- Lose weight if you are overweight.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Symptoms can be controlled with treatment, but recurrence is common.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Usually none expected.
- Frequent heartburn over a long period of time may indicate other disorders, such as a peptic ulcer.
- Irritating stomach acids can damage the esophagus.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

Heartburn usually begins within about an hour after eating and may continue for several hours. Usually no medical care is necessary. Self-treatment with antacids and taking preventive measures should control the symptoms.

MEDICATIONS

For minor discomfort, you may use non-prescription liquid antacids. These preparations coat the inside of the esophagus and neutralize stomach acid. Follow instructions on the bottle. The usual dose is 1 tablespoon taken 1 hour after meals and at bedtime.

ACTIVITY

Resume normal activities as soon as symptoms subside.

DIET

- Avoid foods and beverages that stimulate heavy stomach-acid secretion, such as spicy dishes, coffee, acid fruit juice or alcohol. Avoid chocolate, and reduce your consumption of fatty foods.
- Eat small, frequent meals.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- Swallowing becomes more difficult.
- You regurgitate blood when you have heartburn.
- Heartburn continues despite self-care.
- The following symptoms accompanying heartburn; could mean a heart attack. Seek emergency help:
 - Shortness of breath.
 - Sweating.
 - Pain in the jaw, neck and arm.
 - Nausea or vomiting.
 - Cold, clammy feeling.