

Tips for Living with GERD

What Is GERD?

Almost everyone has experienced heartburn from time to time. A little indigestion after a large meal isn't uncommon, but if heartburn has become a regular occurrence, you might have gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD). The most common complaints with heartburn and GERD include pressure or pain in the center of the chest and/or a sour taste in the mouth. Heartburn occurs when digestive acid flows out of the stomach and back up into the esophagus.

Normally the lower esophageal sphincter muscle prevents stomach acid from coming back up into the esophagus, but if the sphincter muscle isn't working properly, the resulting reflux of acid can cause regular heartburn and may even damage the esophagus.

In addition to heartburn, people with GERD may have problems swallowing and may notice hoarseness in voice. If you have any of these symptoms, you should schedule a visit with your doctor.

How Do Lifestyle Changes Help GERD?

For many people, eating healthy, non-triggering foods and beverages decreases heartburn and helps control GERD. In addition to diet, other factors such as weight, smoking and how you sleep also affect your health and symptoms of GERD. Changes you can start making today include:

- Avoid fatty or spicy foods and caffeine, which stimulate acid.
- Avoid chocolate, peppermint and alcohol, which relax the sphincter muscle and lead to heartburn.
- Eat smaller meals. A full stomach increases your chance of acids spilling into the esophagus.
- Avoid eating for three hours before bedtime. Eating elevates the acid level in your stomach and lying flat can worsen the problem.
- Use a foam wedge to elevate your head when you sleep or place blocks under the headboard end of your bed.
- Don't smoke. Smoking stimulates acid, and there is evidence that it may also be a risk factor for esophageal cancer.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Extra weight puts pressure on your stomach, which can lead to heartburn.
- For immediate relief at home, try over the counter antacids.

Can Medicines Relieve GERD Symptoms?

If lifestyle changes alone don't ease your symptoms consult your doctor. She or he may recommend additional treatment which may include acid reducing medications like H2 Blockers or Proton Pump Inhibitors (for more severe cases) to suppress the production of stomach acid.

Don't ignore regular heartburn. If you take an antacid more than twice a week, have trouble swallowing, experience nausea or vomiting, or pass black stools, call your doctor today to schedule an appointment.

Is GERD Serious?

GERD symptoms that go untreated or persist despite treatment can turn into more serious problems. GERD can cause irritation, inflammation, or wearing away (erosion) of the lining of the esophagus (esophagitis), as well as produce ulcers in the lining of the esophagus. Some people who have symptoms of GERD may develop a condition called Barrett's esophagus that can lead to cancer of the esophagus.

Resources

Visit www.HillPhysicians.com to view or download the *Relief for Heartburn and GERD* video, plus other helpful audio and video podcasts. You can also find tools and information to help you manage your health and learn more about the benefits of membership with Hill Physicians.

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