

# Understanding Acid Reflux, Heartburn, & GERD



One in ten Americans experience heartburn symptoms at least once a week. "Heartburn" is sometimes referred to as "acid reflux." Acid reflux is when stomach acid splashes up from the stomach into the esophagus. Heartburn usually is described as a burning pain in the middle of the chest, sometimes starting high in the abdomen or may extend up the neck or back. The pain may be sharp or pressure-like, rather than burning and can be similar to heart pain (angina). GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) is severe or chronic acid reflux.

Not everyone with GERD has heartburn, but the primary symptoms of GERD are heartburn, regurgitation, and nausea. Typically, heartburn related to GERD is seen more commonly after a meal. Other symptoms include hoarseness, laryngitis, nausea, sore throat, chronic dry cough, asthma, feeling as though there is a lump in your throat, bad breath, earaches, sudden increase of saliva, and chest pain/discomfort.

Contact your doctor about evaluating you for GERD if you take over-the-counter medicine for heartburn more than twice a week, or your heartburn symptoms persist after you take the drug, or you need to take medications for more than three weeks to control heartburn and indigestion, or your symptoms also include weight loss, difficulty or pain swallowing, dark-colored stools, or vomiting. **Call 911 for any chest pain or breathing problems.**

Heartburn has different triggers, including certain foods, medications, obesity, or even stress.

- **[Heartburn During Pregnancy](#)** - More than half of all pregnant women report symptoms of severe heartburn, particularly during their second and third trimesters.
- **[Heartburn and Diet](#)** - Food and drinks that commonly trigger heartburn include red wine, spicy foods, chocolate, citrus fruits, coffee and caffeinated drinks, peppermint, and tomatoes. Fatty foods, large portions, and late-night meals are the top three triggers that affect many people with heartburn.
  - Heartburn is most common after eating a large meal. Try eating five or six small meals instead of large meals and do not eat before bedtime – allow your food to digest for about two hours before lying down.
- **[Heartburn and Exercise](#)** - Crunches and abdominal work can trigger heartburn. Body positions that involve bending over increase pressure on the abdomen, thrusting stomach acids back up into the esophagus. Never exercise on a full stomach. Most experts recommend waiting about two hours after eating before working out.
- **[Heartburn and Medications](#)** - Many different medications can trigger heartburn, or make heartburn worse. Regular use of aspirin or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may irritate the esophagus. Many blood pressure

and heart disease medicines, including calcium channel blockers and nitrates cause your stomach acids to retreat backwards. Other medications that may cause heartburn are oral asthma medicines, sedatives, narcotic painkillers, progesterone, medications for Parkinson's disease, tricyclic antidepressants, and certain iron and potassium supplements. Always tell your doctor if a new prescription or over-the-counter medicine gives you heartburn or makes your heartburn worse.

Your doctor may order some exams/tests to diagnose GERD. These tests include upper endoscopy wherein the doctor takes a look inside your esophagus and stomach, esophageal pH test, and esophageal manometry to see whether your esophagus is working properly. GERD, if not controlled, could lead to serious problems such as esophagitis, esophageal bleeding and ulcers, Barrett's esophagus, strictures, and an increased risk of esophageal cancer.

Heartburn relief can be achieved by some simple lifestyle and diet changes. Because fatty foods, mints, chocolates, alcohol, nicotine, and caffeinated beverages relax the lower esophageal sphincter, you may be able to reduce the amount of acid reflux you experience by avoiding these foods. Carbonated drinks, citrus fruits and juices, spicy foods, and tomato sauce may irritate the lining of your esophagus and make the effects of GERD more severe. Cutting out these foods helps some people who have GERD. Some medications, such as birth control pills and drugs for osteoporosis, may cause reflux and heartburn as a side effect. If medications you are taking seem to be the cause of your heartburn, talk with your doctor about other medications you might be able to use instead. Do not stop taking a prescription medication until you talk with your doctor.

You may help reduce reflux by quitting smoking, wearing loose clothing, eating smaller meals, not lying down for at least three hours after you eat, and losing weight if you are overweight. Some people are able to prevent symptoms by raising the head of their bed or using a pillow that elevates the upper part of the body. Sleeping on your left side may also lessen your symptoms.

If you suffer from heartburn, it is important to find effective heartburn remedies to prevent acid reflux from worsening. **Know your triggers, design a prevention strategy, and enjoy your everyday activities "heartburn free".**

**Visit the Lehigh County intranet site to schedule your appointment at the Wellness Centre.**