



## What is GERD?

GERD stands for gastroesophageal reflux disease. Gastroesophageal reflux happens when contents of the stomach come back up into the esophagus. Stomach acid that touches the lining of the esophagus can cause heartburn, also called acid indigestion.

GERD is a more serious and long-lasting form of heartburn.

## How common is GERD?

Having heartburn once in a while is very common. However, GERD affects about 20 percent of the population.

## What are the complications of GERD?

Without treatment, GERD can sometimes cause serious complications over time, such as:

### Esophagitis

Esophagitis is inflammation in the esophagus. Adults who have chronic esophagitis over many years are more likely to develop precancerous changes in the esophagus.

### Esophageal stricture

An esophageal stricture happens when your esophagus becomes too narrow. Esophageal strictures can lead to problems with swallowing.

### Respiratory problems

With GERD you might breathe stomach acid into your lungs. The stomach acid can then irritate your throat and lungs, causing respiratory problems, such as:

- asthma—a long-lasting disease in your lungs that makes you extra sensitive to things that you're allergic to
- chest congestion, or extra fluid in your lungs
- a dry, long-lasting cough or a sore throat
- hoarseness—the partial loss of your voice
- laryngitis—the swelling of your voice box that can lead to a short-term loss of your voice
- pneumonia—an infection in one or both of your lungs—that keeps coming back
- wheezing—a high-pitched whistling sound when you breathe

### Barrett's esophagus

GERD can sometimes cause Barrett's esophagus. A small number of people with Barrett's esophagus develop a rare, yet often deadly, type of cancer of the esophagus.

## Who is more likely to have GERD?

Anyone can develop GERD, some for unknown reasons. You are more likely to have GERD if you are:

- overweight or obese
- a pregnant woman
- taking certain medicines
- a smoker or regularly exposed to secondhand smoke

## What are the symptoms of heartburn and GERD?

If you have heartburn, you may taste food or stomach acid in the back of your mouth.

The most common symptom of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is regular heartburn, a painful, burning feeling in the middle of your chest, behind your breastbone, and in the middle of your abdomen. Not all adults with GERD have heartburn.

Other common GERD symptoms include:

- bad breath
- nausea
- pain in your chest or the upper part of your abdomen
- problems swallowing or painful swallowing
- respiratory problems
- vomiting
- the wearing away of your teeth

Some symptoms of GERD come from its complications, including those that affect your lungs.

## What causes heartburn and GERD?

Heartburn and GERD happen when your lower esophageal sphincter becomes weak or relaxes when it shouldn't, causing stomach contents to rise up into the esophagus. The lower esophageal sphincter becomes weak or relaxes due to certain things, such as:

- increased pressure on your abdomen from being overweight, obese, or pregnant
- certain medicines, including:
  - ◇ those that doctors use to treat asthma—a long-lasting disease in your lungs that makes you extra sensitive to allergens
  - ◇ calcium channel blockers—medicines that treat high blood pressure
  - ◇ antihistamines—medicines that treat allergy symptoms
  - ◇ painkillers
  - ◇ sedatives—medicines that help put you to sleep
  - ◇ antidepressants—medicines that treat depression
- smoking, or inhaling secondhand smoke

A hiatal hernia can also cause GERD. Hiatal hernia is a condition in which the opening in your diaphragm lets the upper part of the stomach move up into your chest, which lowers the pressure in the esophageal sphincter.



## How do doctors diagnose GERD?

In most cases, doctors diagnose heartburn by reviewing your symptoms and medical history. If those symptoms don't improve with lifestyle changes and medications, if they come back frequently, and/or you have trouble swallowing, your doctor may recommend testing for GERD. Several tests can help a doctor diagnose GERD. Your doctor may order more than one test to make a diagnosis.

## How can I control GERD?

You may be able to control heartburn and GERD by:

- not eating or drinking items which may cause heartburn, such as greasy or spicy foods and alcoholic drinks
- not overeating
- not eating 2 to 3 hours before bedtime
- losing weight if you're overweight or obese
- quitting smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke
- taking over-the-counter medicines

## How do doctors treat GERD?

Depending on the severity of your symptoms, your doctor may recommend lifestyle changes, medicines, surgery, or a combination of these.

### Lifestyle changes

Making lifestyle changes can reduce your heartburn and GERD symptoms by:

- losing weight, if needed
- wearing loose-fitting clothing around your abdomen. Tight clothing can squeeze your stomach area and push acid up into your esophagus.
- staying upright for 3 hours after meals. Avoid reclining or slouching when sitting
- sleeping on a slight angle. Raise the head of your bed 6 to 8 inches by safely putting blocks under the bedposts. Just using extra pillows will not help.
- quit smoking and avoid secondhand smoke

### Over-the-counter and prescription medicines

You can buy many GERD medicines without a prescription. However, if you have symptoms that will not go away, you should see your doctor. All GERD medicines work in different ways. You may need a combination of GERD medicines to control your symptoms.

- Antacids. Doctors often first recommend antacids to relieve heartburn and other mild GERD symptoms.
- H2 blockers. H2 blockers decrease acid production. They provide short-term or on-demand relief for many people with heartburn and GERD symptoms. They can also help heal the esophagus, although not as well as other medicines.
- Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs). PPIs lower the amount of acid your stomach makes. They can heal the esophageal lining in most people with GERD. However, studies show that people who take PPIs for a long time or in high doses are more likely to have hip, wrist, and spinal fractures. You need to take these medicines on an empty stomach so that your stomach acid can make them work.
- Prokinetics. Prokinetics help your stomach empty faster, but can cause problems if you mix them with other medicines.
- Antibiotics. Antibiotics, including erythromycin, can help your stomach empty faster. Erythromycin has fewer side effects than prokinetics.

### Surgery

Your doctor may recommend surgery if your GERD symptoms don't improve with lifestyle changes or medicines.

## Can diet help prevent or relieve GERD?

You can prevent or relieve your symptoms from heartburn or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) by changing your diet. You may need to avoid certain foods and drinks that make your symptoms worse. Other dietary changes that can help reduce your symptoms include:

- decreasing fatty foods
- eating small, frequent meals instead of three large meals

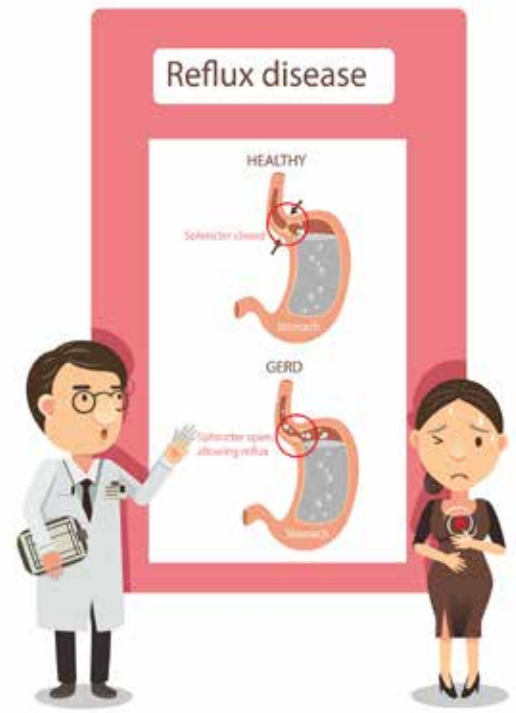
## What should I avoid eating if I have heartburn or GERD?

Avoid eating or drinking the following items that may make heartburn or GERD worse:

- chocolate
- coffee
- peppermint
- greasy or spicy foods
- tomatoes and tomato products
- alcoholic drinks

## What can I eat if I have heartburn or GERD?

Eating healthy and balanced amounts of different types of food is good for your overall health. If you're overweight or obese, talk with your doctor or a dietitian about dietary changes that can help you lose weight and decrease your GERD symptoms.



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