

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

What is GERD?

Gastroesophageal reflux is a digestive problem where there is too much backflow of acid stomach contents into the esophagus.

How does it occur?

The lower esophageal sphincter is a muscular valve between the esophagus and stomach. It opens with the passage of food and normally closes when food has made its way to the stomach.

With gastroesophageal reflux, the sphincter is weak or too relaxed, and often, the acid contents of the stomach can return to the esophagus. Because the esophagus does not have a protective barrier like the stomach, this process can translate into symptoms such as heartburn and can also result in damage to the esophagus.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms of GERD are heartburn and acid back up. They often occur after large meals and are made worse by certain activities such as bending, lifting or lying down.

Heartburn is a burning feeling that occurs in the chest and may move upwards towards the neck, whereas acid back up refers to an unpleasant acid (sour) taste in the mouth that occurs as a result of acid stomach contents backing up through the esophagus.

Less common symptoms include excess saliva and the sensation that a persistent lump exists in the back of the throat despite no evidence of this on physical exam. In addition, some people have presented with less typical symptoms such as ongoing cough and sore throat.

How is it diagnosed?

Most people are diagnosed with GERD based on a well-taken history and physical exam. Your health care provider may consider further testing based on the history if the diagnosis is in question.

What is the treatment?

Lifestyle changes may be helpful in relieving some of the symptoms of GERD. Some helpful measures include:

- Dietary Changes:
 - Avoid certain foods that may make your symptoms worse such as chocolate, alcohol, peppermints, coffee, onions, fats, citrus, and tomato-based products.
 - Avoid large meals and try not to eat at least 2-4 hours prior to sleeping.
- Raising the head of bed with sleep at least 6 inches.
- Weight loss if you are overweight.
- Stop smoking.

See additional tips on page 4 of this handout.

Over-the-counter antacids are not always effective in treating GERD but may be tried as a way to help relieve symptoms.

If these simple things do not help relieve your symptoms, your health care provider may prescribe a medication that will help decrease the acid produced from the stomach. In addition, there are surgical options for some patients who do not respond to medical treatment.

How long will the effects last?

GERD is usually relieved with the right treatment after a few days. However, it is a chronic condition for many people and it is not uncommon to have recurrences.

How can I take care of myself?

If you have GERD, it is important to be aware that symptoms may recur. Avoid habits that have caused symptoms in the past is the best practice. Eating the correct diet, having a normal weight, and taking your medications as prescribed will be helpful in preventing repeat problems.

When should I call the doctor?

Notify your health care provider if you have any of the following alarm symptoms:

- Unexplained weight loss
- Trouble with swallowing
- Chest pain
- Choking
- Blood in the stools
- Vomiting
- Pain with swallowing
- Early fullness after a meal

What can I do to prevent or reduce reflux?

- **Limit Caffeine.** Limit coffee to 2-3 cups per day. Limiting consumption of other caffeine-containing beverages (tea, soft drinks) may also be helpful.
- **Avoid Tight Clothing:** Tight belts, tight pants or girdles can increase the pressure on the stomach.
- **Avoid Foods That Cause Your Symptoms:** Foods to avoid are:
 - spicy and fatty foods
 - tomato and citrus juices (such as grapefruit and orange juices)
 - chocolate, mints, coffee, tea, cola, and alcoholic drinks.
- **Do Not Lie Down for 2 Hours After Eating:** Allow gravity to work. Also, avoid bending over at the waist to pick up things; instead bend at the knees.

- **Stop Smoking:** If you cannot stop, decreasing the number of cigarettes you smoke may help.
- **Bed Blocks:** Elevate the head of your bed 2-6 inches with wood blocks or bricks. Using extra pillows is **not** a good substitute. Use of a foam wedge beneath the upper half of the body is an alternative
- **Maintain Your Ideal Weight:** Excess weight increases the amount of pressure constantly placed on your stomach. Even small amounts of weight loss may help.
- **Antacids:** Can be taken at bedtime and 30-60 minutes after each meal or as directed by your physician.
- **Acid Suppression Medications:** Take these medications 30-60 minutes before meals.
- **Eat Smaller Meals:** Don't overfill your stomach.

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