

“I often hear people complaining about heartburn. What is it and how is it treated?”

Heartburn has many possible causes and forms of treatment.

Heartburn, medically known as acid reflux, may be alleviated by making some lifestyle changes. However, frequent heartburn is a serious condition that can lead to future health problems if it continues.

What is acid reflux?

Acid reflux occurs when stomach acid flows back into your esophagus, the tube that delivers food to your stomach. It is usually an uncomfortable feeling, and can be caused by:

- Obesity
- Pregnancy
- Hiatal hernia
- Smoking
- Fried, spicy or fatty foods
- Chocolate or peppermint
- Acidic foods, like oranges and tomatoes
- Large meals or eating late at night
- Alcohol or caffeinated drinks
- Some medications used to treat asthma, high blood pressure, allergies, pain, sleep issues and depression

Symptoms

The most obvious symptom of acid reflux is a burning sensation in your chest, which is where the term “heartburn” originated. However, acid reflux can have other symptoms:

- Regurgitation of food or liquid
- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Difficulty swallowing

These symptoms are more likely to appear when you go to bed. Lying down prevents the full effects of gravity, so acid from your stomach is more likely to flow back into your esophagus. You may also experience acid reflux while exercising.

Acid Reflux vs. GERD

Many people experience acid reflux at some point, but if it becomes a reoccurring issue, you should call your primary care provider (PCP). You may have a condition known as GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). GERD is diagnosed when mild acid reflux occurs at least twice a week, or moderate to severe acid reflux occurs at least once a week. Its symptoms are very similar to occasional acid reflux, but may also include:

- Nausea
- Frequent vomiting
- Respiratory issues
- Erosion of tooth enamel

GERD should be taken seriously because without treatment, it can lead to:

- **Scar tissue in the esophagus:** can narrow the opening to the stomach, potentially leading to problems with swallowing
- **An esophageal ulcer:** can also cause problems with swallowing, as well as bleeding
- **Barrett's esophagus:** cells changing in the esophagus due to damage from frequent exposure to stomach acid. Barrett's esophagus increases the risk of esophageal cancer.

Treatment

Treatments for occasional acid reflux and GERD are usually very similar. The first step is to address any lifestyle changes that you can make to reduce the chances of acid reflux and its symptoms:

- If you smoke, quit. Fallon Health's smoking cessation program, Quit to Win, can help you. If you are interested, call 1-888-807-2908 or email QuitToWin@fallonhealth.org.
- If you are overweight or obese, consider losing weight.
- Limit your consumption of greasy, fatty, acidic and spicy foods, as well as alcohol.
- Do not overeat, and avoid eating two to three hours before bedtime.
- As much as possible, wear loose fitting clothing around the stomach. Tight clothes can put pressure on your abdomen and push acid into your esophagus.
- Over-the-counter antacids like Tums® and Rolaids®, which neutralize stomach acid, may also be used to alleviate symptoms. These should not be taken on a regular basis without your PCP's supervision.

If lifestyle changes don't help, your PCP may decide to have you take medications that reduce stomach acid production. Discuss the best course of action with him or her.

For more information about acid reflux and GERD, visit fallonhealth.org, click Healthwise® Knowledgebase under Quick links, and search "acid reflux".

