

Heartburn

Although the name heartburn suggests a connection to the heart, the condition is actually unrelated to the heart. Heartburn is caused by acid from the stomach irritating the esophagus. The lower esophageal sphincter, or LES, tightens to prevent the escape of stomach acid, but if the LES is relaxed or not closed completely it can cause a burning sensation.

Heartburn has several symptoms, including:

- A burning feeling in the chest just behind the breastbone that occurs after eating and lasts a few minutes to several hours.
- Chest pain, especially after bending over, lying down, or eating.
- Burning in the throat -- or hot, sour, acidic, or salty-tasting fluid at the back of the throat.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Feeling of food "sticking" in the middle of the chest or throat.

Heartburn is often caused by excessive consumption of food or too much pressure on the stomach. Obesity and pregnancy often place additional strain on the stomach, which is why so many pregnant women experience heartburn on an almost daily basis. If you are overweight, reducing your weight through diet and exercise can help to eliminate heartburn.

Processed foods, overeating, smoking, or too much caffeine or alcohol are some of the causes of heartburn. Individuals may have their own triggers for heartburn, so keeping a food journal sometimes helps to find the culprits. It may help to avoid eating large meals less than four hours before going to bed.

Most people only experience heartburn on occasion, but those who have chronic heartburn should be cautious and consult their doctor if they feel they suffer from heartburn on a regular basis. Frequent heartburn can develop into a gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) or other more serious conditions.

Lifestyle Habits That Contribute to GERD

- Being overweight
- Smoking
- Wearing tight-fitting clothing or belts
- Lying down or bending over, especially after eating
- Stress

Medical Causes

- Pregnancy.
- Bulging of part of the stomach into the chest cavity, also called hiatal hernia.
- GERD.
- Taking certain medications, especially some antibiotics and aspirin.

Tips to Alleviate Heartburn Symptoms

- Raise the head of your bed about 6 inches to allow gravity to help keep the stomach's contents in the stomach. (Do not use piles of pillows because this puts your body into a bent position that actually aggravates the condition by increasing pressure on the abdomen. Instead, put books under the legs of the bed to raise it up.)
- Eat meals at least three to four hours before lying down and avoid bedtime snacks.
- Eat smaller meals.
- Maintain a healthy weight to eliminate unnecessary intra-abdominal pressure caused by extra pounds.
- Limit consumption of fatty foods, chocolate, peppermint, coffee, tea, colas, and alcohol -- all of which can relax the lower esophageal sphincter -- and tomatoes and citrus fruits or juices, which contribute additional acid that can irritate the esophagus.
- Give up smoking, which also relaxes the lower esophageal sphincter.
- Wear loose belts and clothing.