

GERD (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease)

What does this mean?

What is it?

GERD (or Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease) occurs when a small valve (the lower esophageal sphincter or LES) between the stomach and esophagus leaks, causing digestive fluids and stomach acid to back up from the stomach into the esophagus. This acid can irritate the esophagus leading to symptoms. GERD can also damage the delicate lining on the inside of the esophagus, leading to more serious problems in some patients.

Frequent heartburn is the most common symptom of GERD and often occurs after meals. It is often described as an uncomfortable rising, burning sensation behind the breastbone. Other major symptoms of GERD are: regurgitation of gastric acid or sour contents in to the mouth, difficult and/or painful swallowing and chest pain.

If you frequently experience heartburn or other symptoms, see your doctor.

What is the goal of treatment?

The goal of treatment is to reduce the amount of stomach acid “backing up” into the esophagus. Medical treatment may be necessary to relieve symptoms and heal any damage to the esophagus.

What steps can be taken to relieve GERD symptoms?

Follow all of your doctor’s directions and take any medications as directed. Turn the page for simple lifestyle changes that you may find helpful. Please consult with your doctor to see which of these is appropriate for you.

1. Elevate head of bed with 3 to 6 inch block.
2. Do not eat or drink for 3 hours after last meal before going to bed.
3. Avoid coffee or caffeine containing beverages after 4 p.m.
4. Medication as prescribed by your doctor.
5. Take antacids at bedtime, e.g. Mylanta, Maalox, or Tums.

**Your doctor has told you that you have
gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)...
You are not alone. Approximately 17 million people in the United
States suffer from symptoms of gastrointestinal reflux.**

WHAT IS GERD?

GERD – sometimes referred to as “reflux” – is a fairly common disease of the digestive tract. In GERD patients, harsh gastric juices from the stomach back up, or “reflux” into the esophagus (the muscular tube that carries food from the throat to the stomach).

GERD patients do not all have the same symptoms, but many experience some or even all of the following:

- Frequent heartburn (the most common symptom)
- Sour or bitter taste from fluid flowing backward from, or regurgitated from, the stomach
- Difficult or painful swallowing
- Hoarseness
- Nighttime wheezing or coughing
- The need to clear your throat repeatedly
- A worsening of symptoms after eating, or when bending over or lying down

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMMON HEARTBURN AND GERD?

Heartburn is the burning pain felt behind the breastbone when harsh stomach juices back up into the esophagus. Most people get heartburn once in awhile. But you have GERD, this heartburn and other symptoms occur regularly and may interfere with your daily activities.

WHAT CAUSES GERD?

The reason stomach juices back up into the esophagus has to do with a muscular ring called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), which is located where the stomach and the esophagus meet. The LES is designed to open to allow for the **one-way** transport of food and saliva into the stomach. When you are not eating or swallowing, this sphincter is meant to remain tightly closed in order to keep the contents of the stomach where they belong.

But in those with GERD, the LES is probably not working properly. For most GERD sufferers, the problem is that the sphincter will suddenly relax for short periods of time throughout the day; this is known as “spontaneous LES relaxations.” For a much smaller number of patients, the sphincter is just too weak to do its job properly.

Regardless of the cause, stomach juices can back up into the esophagus when the LES is not functioning properly. These juices are meant to help digest food, but they contain acid that is too harsh for the esophagus. In fact, acid can actually inflame and damage the esophagus.

It's not your fault

What's important to realize is that GERD is a disease – you don't have GERD because you eat the wrong foods or you're overweight...or because you drink too much or eat too much. These situations **can make your symptoms worse** and can cause heartburn even in people who don't have GERD, but **they are not the reason you have GERD.**

Is GERD serious?

If left untreated, it is possible for GERD to progress and to cause serious complications. Some of the more serious complications that can result if GERD is **not controlled** are cough, hoarseness, bleeding in the esophagus, and a narrowing of the esophagus that makes it very difficult or painful to swallow. Very rarely, surgery is recommended for patients with GERD whose symptoms do not improve after other types of treatment.

The good news: your doctor can help!

The treatment of GERD is usually a long-term process that requires regular communication with your doctor. GERD patients are not all alike. Their symptoms are triggered by different situations and stimuli. Your doctor can help identify the things that may make your symptoms worse and can suggest ways to avoid them. There are also medications your doctor can prescribe that can reduce the acid in the stomach juices that back up into your esophagus, which in turn helps relieve the symptoms of GERD.

And you can help, too!

Communicating with your doctor regularly is an important way you can help yourself to live more comfortably with GERD – with fewer symptoms, or perhaps without any symptoms. Discuss with your doctor how often you have symptoms, how they affect your life-style, what makes you feel better or worse, and whether you still have symptoms with your drug therapy. Together, the two of you can design a treatment plan that will work best for you. For example, depending on what triggers your symptoms, changes in specific habits or adaptations of life-style may be recommended to help alleviate symptoms. **Never make any dramatic changes to your diet or life-style without first talking to your doctor.**

- If certain foods trigger symptoms for you, your doctor may recommend that you avoid them. Some of the foods that cause problems for some patients are: coffee, chocolate, fatty or spicy foods, carbonated beverages, peppermint, spearmint, citrus fruits, tomatoes, whole milk, and onions. You may find that many of these foods don't bother you, but that other foods do. If some foods are a problem, you and your doctor should be able to work out a well-balanced eating plan tailored to suit your needs.
- If you have symptoms when you lie down, your doctor might suggest that you avoid eating meals close to bedtime.
- If you are overweight, your doctor may suggest losing weight to help alleviate symptoms.
- If alcohol tends to cause symptoms, your doctor may suggest that you drink alcoholic beverages in moderation.
- If smoking seems to trigger symptoms, your doctor may suggest that you cut down on smoking, or better yet, quit.

- If you are taking any prescription medications, be certain to ask your doctor to determine if they are contributing to your symptoms. Also tell your doctor if you are taking aspirin or other anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen and naproxyn. **Never change any medications without first consulting your doctor.**
- If you have any symptoms during the night, your doctor may ask you to elevate the upper part of your body while you sleep. This can be done by propping up the head of your bed 6 to 10 inches higher than the foot of your bed...or by using a special wedge-shaped pillow that keeps your chest, neck, and head higher than your stomach.

The medication that your doctor has given you is one of several treatment options available. Since all drug therapies are not equally effective for all GERD patients, with your doctor in order to help your doctor better assess your condition and provide you with the most appropriate medication.

Remember, since GERD is a very individualized disease, only you can tell your doctor whether symptoms continue to disrupt your life-style and ask for his or her help.

GERD – Patient Instructions

Some patients find that some or all of the following suggestions are helpful in reducing or preventing heartburn and other symptoms of GERD. Consult with your doctor to determine which of these measures may be appropriate for you.

1. 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.

2. Avoid Foods if they Cause Symptoms

Foods that may aggravate the symptoms include: spicy and fatty foods, tomato and citrus juices (such as grapefruit and orange juices), chocolate, mints, coffee, tea, colas, and alcoholic beverages.

3. 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.

4. Stop smoking

If you cannot stop, decreasing the number of cigarettes you smoke may help.

5. Limit coffee

Limit coffee to 2-3 cups per day. Limiting consumption of other caffeine-containing beverages (tea, soft drinks) may also be helpful.

6. Avoid Tight Clothing

Tight belts, tight pants or girdles can increase the pressure on the abdomen.

7. Antacids

Antacids can be taken at bedtime and 30-60 minutes after each meal or as directed by your physician.

8. Eat Smaller Meals

Don't overfill your stomach.

9. Maintain Your Ideal Weight

Excess weight increases the amount of pressure constantly placed on your stomach. Even small amounts of weight loss may help.