

Sensation of food coming back up into the throat. Heartburn (also known as acid indigestion) is a symptom, not a disease, and has nothing to do with the heart. It can affect all ages, but is most common in adults over 60. The symptoms are sometimes mistaken for a heart attack. When heartburn occurs often or complications develop, the problem is known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

## Frequent Signs and Symptoms

- Belching or backward flow of stomach contents into the mouth and throat. This produces an acid taste.
- Heavy burning, or feeling of discomfort, in the chest.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Mild stomach pain or bloated feeling.
- Vomiting (rarely).

## Causes

Heartburn is caused by a backflow of acid from the stomach into the esophagus. The esophagus is the tube that goes from the mouth to the stomach. The muscles that close off the upper stomach become lax (loose). This allows stomach juices to enter the esophagus and irritate its lining.

## Risk Increases With

- Hiatal hernia (a part of the stomach bulges into the chest)
- Ulcers (deep sores) of the esophagus
- Stress
- Improper diet, overeating
- Overweight
- Smoking
- Excess alcohol consumption
- Use of certain drugs

## Preventive Measures

- Avoid smoking.
- Don't overeat or use an excess amount of alcohol.
- Reduce the amount of fats, deep-fried foods, spices, coffee, tea, and tomato products in your diet.
- Don't bend over or lie down immediately after eating.
- Don't wear tight clothes that restrict your body.
- Elevate the head of the bed 4 to 6 inches with blocks.
- Lose weight if you are overweight.

## Expected Outcomes

Symptoms can usually be controlled with changes in lifestyle, eating habits, and drug therapy.

## Possible Complications

- Usually none expected.
- Irritating stomach acids can damage the esophagus.

## Diagnosis and Treatment

### General Measures

- Heartburn usually begins in about an hour after eating and may continue for several hours. Self-care involves taking preventive measures and heartburn drugs, if needed, to control the symptoms.
- If the problem gets worse or self-care is not working, see your health care provider. A physical exam will be done and questions asked about your symptoms. Medical tests are usually not needed, but may be done to help diagnose any complications.
- Stop smoking. Find a way that will work for you.
- Rarely, surgery may be recommended when other treatment steps are not helping the symptoms.
- To learn more: National Heartburn Alliance, 303 East Wacker Drive, Suite 440, Chicago, IL 60601; (877) 471-2081; website: [www.heartburnalliance.org](http://www.heartburnalliance.org)

## Medications

---

- For minor discomfort, you may use any of the heartburn preventive drugs available without a prescription. Different ones work for different people. If one type does not work for you, a different type may help.
- A stronger type of heartburn drug may be prescribed.
- If a drug you take is causing heartburn, change in dosage or a new drug may be prescribed.

**Notify our office if** you or a family member has heartburn that continues or worsens despite self-care.

The following symptoms that occur with heartburn could mean a heart attack. Seek emergency help:

- Shortness of breath; pain in the jaw, neck, and arm.
- Sweating, and cold, clammy feeling.
- Nausea or vomiting.

## Activity

---

Resume normal activities as soon as symptoms improve.

## Diet

---

- Avoid foods and beverages that cause excess stomach acid, such as spicy dishes, coffee, acidic fruit juice, or alcohol. Avoid chocolate, and eat less fatty foods.
- Eat small, frequent meals.