

Heartburn

It Can Be An Occasional Ailment Or A Chronic Problem

One of life's many pleasures is enjoying a delicious meal, then savoring feelings of contentment. On a daily basis, 15 million Americans do not get to enjoy the contentment part of this equation. Their pleasure is negated by heartburn, also known as acid indigestion and acid reflux.

Most common in older adults, heartburn often begins with a burning sensation in the lower chest, just below the sternum. From there, the pain or discomfort can radiate upward to the neck. Other symptoms may include hoarseness, sore throat, a chronic cough, the feeling of a lump in the throat, and/or the sensation of food coming back into the mouth along with a bitter taste.

Occasional heartburn is often a part of life. However, if it becomes chronic, it can lead to serious complications, as well as hinder eating, daily activity and a good night's sleep.



For people susceptible to heartburn, making smarter food choices can pay off. For example, avoiding fatty and spicy foods can decrease the symptoms.

Cause

Heartburn occurs when the "door" to the stomach opens to let food in from the esophagus, but does not close quickly enough or completely. The door is actually the lower esophageal sphincter muscle and, when working properly, it prevents food and stomach acids from flowing back (reflux) into the esophagus.

This condition occurs most often after overeating, when bending over, or when lying down. When it occurs on a frequent basis, the esophagus lining can become inflamed (esophagitis).

In addition, if heartburn becomes chronic, it can be a symptom of another ailment.

- ◆ Acid reflux disease.
- ◆ Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).
- ◆ An inflamed stomach lining (gastritis).
- ◆ Hiatal hernia.
- ◆ Peptic ulcer.

Avoidance

Here are some things to avoid in order to lessen the symptoms of heartburn.

- ◆ Coffee (even decaf) and caffeine drinks.
- ◆ Alcohol.
- ◆ Carbonated drinks.
- ◆ Citrus fruits and juices.
- ◆ Tomatoes and tomato products.
- ◆ Garlic and onions.
- ◆ Cigarette smoking.
- ◆ Aspirin, ibuprofen and certain medications.
- ◆ Chocolate.
- ◆ Mints and peppermints.
- ◆ Fatty and spicy foods.
- ◆ Carrying excess weight and overeating.
- ◆ Mustard and vinegar.

(Sources: FamilyDoctor.org, HealthInAging.org, gi.org, gastro.org, Nat. Inst. Of Diabetes and Digestive & Kidney Diseases)

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