

Managing Acid Reflux

What is acid reflux (gastroesophageal reflux)?

Acid reflux (gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD) is when acid from the stomach backs up into the esophagus. It can happen when the opening from the stomach to the throat is weak, or when food takes longer to leave the stomach. Heartburn is the most common symptom of GERD.

Heartburn is the burning feeling in your chest and throat caused when stomach acid backs up into your throat. Some foods and habits can make heartburn and GERD worse.

What can I do to make my GERD better?

Changing what and how you eat can sometimes help the symptoms of GERD. Lifestyle changes can help too.

Eating tips

- Try not to eat too much food at one time. Eat 5 to 6 small meals throughout the day. Having smaller amounts of food in your stomach means there is less chance of stomach acid backing up into your throat.
- Choose lower fat foods. Fat takes longer to leave your stomach, which may make symptoms worse for some people. Choose lean meats and lower fat dairy products (2% milk fat (MF) or less for milk and yogurts; 20% MF or less for cheese).
- Use lower fat cooking methods like grilling, baking, or steaming.
- Reduce your intake of fried foods and the amount of fat added to foods.
- Eating fast or gulping drinks may make you swallow more air. This can make symptoms worse for some people. Eat and drink slowly, and chew foods well. Don't use straws, chew gum, or drink pop or other fizzy drinks.

- Cut back or cut out caffeine if it bothers you. Caffeine relaxes the muscle at the opening of the stomach, which allows stomach acid to back up into your throat. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, energy drinks, pop, chocolate, and some medicines.
- Alcohol and peppermint may relax the muscle at the opening of the stomach. Don't use them if they make your symptoms worse.
- Citrus fruits and juices, tomatoes, chocolate, onions, garlic, and strong spices may cause heartburn for some people. The foods that bother you at one time may not bother you forever. Try adding these foods back into your diet once in a while.
- Don't eat the foods that bother you. If you choose to eat foods that might cause heartburn, eat them at the end of a meal. For example, eat an orange at the end of a meal instead of on an empty stomach.

Lifestyle tips

- If you smoke, quit. Nicotine relaxes the muscle at the opening of the stomach.
- Reach and stay at a healthy weight. This will lower the pressure on the muscle at the opening of the stomach.
- Don't lie down for 2 to 3 hours after eating to lower the chance of stomach acid backing up into your throat.
- Try raising the head of your bed by 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 cm). This makes it harder for stomach contents to back up into your throat. You can do this by adding blocks under the bed legs or using a foam wedge under your mattress. Sleeping on extra pillows won't prevent reflux, as this only raises your head, not your upper body.
- Don't wear tight clothing across the stomach and chest.

When to talk to your healthcare provider

Talk to your healthcare provider right away if you have any of the symptoms below. These symptoms may not be signs of GERD and might need medical attention right away:

- throwing up (vomiting)
- black stool
- trouble swallowing
- chest pain
- losing weight without trying

Also talk to your healthcare provider if:

- you want to use antacids or other medicines for your acid reflux
- you think your other medicines might be making your acid reflux worse
- your symptoms don't get better with diet and lifestyle changes

Some acid reflux medicines make it harder for your body to use certain vitamins, like vitamin B₁₂. You might need supplements if you've been on acid reflux medicine for a long time. Talk to your healthcare provider to see if this applies to you.