

eHouseCall 2007

A Monthly Electronic Newsletter from HealthLink

Doctor's Bag



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WHEN TO CALL THE DOCTOR

Chronic heartburn is a digestive disorder. Many patients are successful at self-managing the condition; others must rely on over-the-counter medications, prescription drugs or even surgery. Which is right for you?

Generally speaking, call your doctor if simple dietary changes or over-the-counter remedies don't offer relief. Heartburn can be a sign of more serious problems like gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), and untreated GERD can lead to serious complications like esophageal cancer.

More specifically, call your doctor if you experience any of the following symptoms along with heartburn:

- ◆ Difficulty or pain with swallowing;
- ◆ Nausea and/or vomiting;
- ◆ Drastic weight loss;
- ◆ Chronic hoarseness, wheezing or asthma;
- ◆ Chest pain along with: pain in the neck, jaw, arms or legs; shortness of breath; weakness; irregular pulse; or sweating;
- ◆ Extreme stomach pain;
- ◆ Diarrhea; black or bloody bowel movements.

Your personal physician is the best resource for health information. Talk to your doctor if you have questions about heartburn or any other conditions.

HLInfo YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HEALTH CARE AWARENESS

FEBRUARY

DO-IT-YOURSELF HEARTBURN CONTROL

What is heartburn?

According to the writers for *webmd.com*, "Heartburn, also called acid indigestion, is an irritation of the esophagus caused by acid that refluxes (comes up) from the stomach. When swallowing, food passes down the throat and through the esophagus to the stomach.

Normally, a muscular valve called the lower esophageal sphincter opens to allow food into the stomach (or to permit belching); then it closes again. Next, the stomach releases strong acids to help break down the food. But if the lower esophageal sphincter opens too often or does not close tight enough, stomach acid can reflux into the esophagus, damaging it and causing the burning sensation we know as heartburn."

Here are tips to help you manage your heartburn.

Don't eat your heart out.

- ◆ Stop eating before you are completely full. A full stomach can cause undigested food to reflux into the esophagus.
- ◆ Avoid the "known offenders" – food or drink that is fatty, fried, acidic and/or spicy. Stay away from fatty or fried meats, snacks and vegetables; chocolate; citrus juices, alcoholic, carbonated or caffeinated beverages; and high-fat dairy products.
- ◆ Don't eat within two-three hours before bedtime and keep your head elevated slightly while you sleep. Lying down with a full stomach can cause food to reflux.
- ◆ Maintain a healthy weight. For many people, as little as 10% weight loss can reduce heartburn symptoms.

Stop smoking.

- ◆ Yet another reason to quit – smoking stimulates the production of stomach acid and relaxes the esophageal sphincter.

Loosen up.

- ◆ Don't wear belts or clothes that are too tight around the waist.
- ◆ And "loosen up" as in RELAX. There's no definitive proof that stress causes heartburn, but stress has a way of making us eat, drink, smoke – get the picture?



DidUKnow?

The NHBA (National Heartburn Alliance) conducted a survey in the Spring of 2003. The survey asked American adults who suffer from frequent heartburn about attitudes, behaviors and product usage.

The survey revealed interesting information about the impact of heartburn on individuals as well as the level of awareness of the condition on a national basis. Below are summary points of the survey:

- ◆ People who either experienced heartburn or took heartburn medication two or more days a week were classified as "frequent heartburn sufferers."
- ◆ 26% (an estimated 54 million) of adult Americans suffer from frequent heartburn.
- ◆ Half of frequent heartburn sufferers believe it is impossible to live heartburn-free.
- ◆ More than 90% of frequent heartburn sufferers say that frequent heartburn impacts their quality of life in some specific way.
- ◆ Almost a third of frequent heartburn sufferers feel they will never be able to enjoy the foods they love.
- ◆ One-third of frequent heartburn sufferers say the cost of medication has an impact on their ability to treat their heartburn.

Newsletter Information Sources:

WebMD "A Heartburn Relief Lifestyle" (www.webmd.com); National Heartburn Alliance (www.heartburnalliance.com); About.com "How to Prevent Heartburn" (<http://heartburn.about.com>)

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