Dietary Relief from GERD

Tame the flames of gastroesophageal reflux disease naturally, with dietary and lifestyle changes.

The burning sensation of heartburn in your chest, caused by stomach contents flowing back up into your esophagus (food pipe), can be agonizing. If you experience this more than twice a week for a few weeks, you may have GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). GERD affects approximately 20 percent of people in the U.S. and is on the rise due to the epidemic of obesity. Although some people rely on antacids to soothe their symptoms, dietary and lifestyle changes can be a big help.

Recognizing reflux. Heartburn is a tell-tale sign of acid reflux, but some people with acid reflux don’t experience heartburn. “Throat symptoms such as a chronic cough, hoarseness, frequent throat clearing, throat burning, difficulty swallowing, and/or a lump-like sensation in the throat may indicate a more severe form of acid reflux disease,” says Jonathan Aviv, MD, an otolaryngologist and clinical director of the Voice and Swallowing Center at ENT and Allergy Associates in New York City and author of Killing Me Softly from Inside: The Mysteries and Dangers of Acid Reflux. “Such throat symptoms are better predictors of risk for esophageal cancer than traditional heartburn symptoms.”

This cancer risk is a big reason you shouldn’t ignore any symptoms of reflux and should be evaluated by your doctor. “A precursor of esophageal cancer that we examine patients for is Barrett’s esophagus, which is an abnormal lining of the lower part of the esophagus caused by chronic acid reflux,” says Pankaj Vashi, MD, a gastroenterologist and chair of the department of medicine at Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Zion, Illinois.

Medication precautions. Television ads promote many over-the-counter (OTC) drugs for reflux. “The general recommendation is to take OTC acid reflux medication for two weeks, then stop the medication to see if the symptoms come back. If the reflux symptoms return, you need to go to your primary care doctor,” Vashi says.

Doctors may prescribe stronger doses of drugs called proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs), such as Prilosec and Nexium, for longer-term use, but they’re not risk-free. PPIs can weaken bones over time since they suppress acid production, which impairs calcium absorption, Aviv says. “I prefer to try to get people to change their diet and lifestyle rather than relying on medication.”

Acidic Foods

For people with reflux, Aviv says the most problematic dietary items based on acidity are citrus fruits, tomato products, vinegar, wine, soda, and bottled iced tea. But that’s not all. Many canned and bottled foods have become more acidic since the 1970s, when the FDA started requiring certain acidity levels for food safety reasons.

“This is one reason why you’ll see ingredients such as citric acid or ascorbic acid in canned foods and beverages,” Aviv says. Adding vinegar also increases acidity. For example, cucumbers have a pH around 5.5, whereas dill pickles have a pH around 3.5, so pickles are 100 times more acidic. Choosing fresh or plain frozen foods typically avoids acidic additives.

Lifestyle and reflux. In addition to dietary changes, Vashi emphasizes these strategies to reduce reflux:

- Lose weight, if overweight. Excess weight puts pressure on your stomach and relaxes the LES.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing around the waist.
- Avoid smoking and second-hand smoke.
- Eat smaller meals and avoid eating for three hours before lying down.
- Elevate the head of your bed a bit (up to 30 degrees).

—Marsha McCulloch, MS, RD