Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Combating acid reflux: personal prevention and medical treatment

If you're like most people, chances are you've had experience with an upset stomach at some point in your life, and possibly occasional bad indigestion or heartburn.



But for many people, indigestion isn't just a reaction to a meal gone wrong—it's a daily occurrence that keeps them from feeling healthy and going about their activities. Between five and seven per cent of the population suffers from acid reflux, sometimes called gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD), a digestive disorder that causes severe heartburn, chronic sore throat, and can result in lasting physical and emotional damage.

What is Acid Reflux?

After finishing a meal, our bodies use a combination of swallowing, the effects of gravity and a valve between our esophagus and stomach called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), to pass the food into the digestive system. That's where powerful acids begin to break down the meal for digestion. The problem for acid reflux sufferers, according to scientists, is that the LES valve doesn't work properly. So instead of staying down in the stomach where it belongs, the acid comes up the esophagus. If left untreated, the condition can cause an inflammation of the esophagus and dysphagia, a condition marked by difficulty swallowing. There is also some evidence that acid reflux can, over the long term, lead to esophageal cancer.

How Do I Know if I Have It?

- Some common symptoms of acid reflux include:
- Belching
- Chronic sore throat or cough
- Difficulty or pain when swallowing
- Waterbrash (sudden excess of saliva)
- Hoarseness
- Sour taste in the mouth
- Bad breath
- Inflammation of the gums

If you have the above problems, make sure to consult with a health professional about your condition.

How Can I Prevent and Treat this Problem?

If you frequently suffer from acid reflux, here are some prevention options that you can try:

Eat food slowly. Because of hectic work and home lives, most people tend to wolf down food rather than allowing time for it to properly digest. Research shows that eating too quickly can trigger symptoms of acid reflux. Overeating can also be a source of digestive problems.

Reduce negative thoughts. Even though acid reflux and heartburn are physical problems, the mind plays a significant role in determining how severe attacks are and how often they occur. In fact, for many people, just worrying about acid reflux is enough to cause symptoms. That's why health professionals often recommend cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a psychological technique where a trained therapist teaches sufferers how to think about their illness in less negative terms. Treatment options may include progressive relaxation—tensing all your muscles and gradually relaxing each one—as well as hypnotherapy and meditation. Biofeedback, a therapy that uses electrical signals to improve a patient's ability to relax, can also help reduce stress and negative thinking.

Watch what you eat. Certain foods are more likely to cause digestive problems, particularly those high in fat and salt. Chocolate, peppermint, citrus fruits and tomatoes can also be factors. If you're not sure what's responsible for your condition, consider keeping a food diary—writing down what you eat and whether those foods caused any heartburn or acid reflux.

Exercise. Regular exercise can help improve the digestive system, reduce heartburn and release stress. In addition, medical studies have shown a link between obesity and GERD. It's important to remember that some forms of exercise, such as jogging, can be too jarring and result in a worsening of the problem. If you suffer from a digestive disorder, consider trying a lower impact activity like cycling, yoga or swimming.

Don't lounge after eating. Gravity is an important part of the digestive process because it helps force food into the stomach and helps keep acid from coming up. When you slump down in front of the TV after a meal, you don't allow gravity to properly do its job, and raise the chances of having acid reflux. This is also the reason why eating before going to bed increases the likelihood of an attack. In fact, some scientists have found that many cases of insomnia are actually caused by acid from the digestive process coming back up the esophagus while the sufferer is sleeping.

Cut out nicotine. Medical researchers have fingered tobacco as a primary cause of acid reflux because it weakens the valve connecting the esophagus to your stomach. Cigarette smokers are known to be 70 per cent more likely than non-smokers to develop the condition.

Cut down on caffeine and alcohol. When it comes to acid reflux, these two popular substances are like criminal suspects who get questioned but not officially charged. That's because while scientists have never been able to prove a strong formal link between them and the onset of GERD, excessive caffeine and alcohol can irritate the stomach and make the problem even worse.

Add fibre to your diet. Foods higher in fibre, such as whole grains, dried fruits and nuts, can be beneficial in combating GERD because they help improve the digestion process. If you're currently suffering from acid reflux, consider adding a source of fibre into your daily diet.

What Medical Treatments are Available?

If you've tried the personal prevention advice above and are still suffering from ongoing acid reflux, consult with your doctor. He or she may consider one or more of the following medical treatments:

Antacids. Over-the-counter antacids work by neutralizing the acids in your stomach and relieving the symptoms associated with indigestion and heartburn. They're generally short lasting, however, and the symptoms will usually return if left untreated.

Prescription medication. If other treatments are not effective in relieving acid reflux symptoms, doctors can prescribe stronger medication called proton pump inhibitors that block acid production for longer periods of time. This treatment, along with another class of drugs called H2 Blockers, can be especially helpful in preventing acid reflux at night.

Specialized medical treatment. In some situations, the symptoms of acid reflux can actually be caused by an underlying heart condition. Seek medical treatment from a heart specialist immediately if you
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experience heartburn along with any of the following problems: dizziness, shortness of breath, vomiting, diarrhea, extreme abdominal pain, fever, or black or bloodstained bowel movements.

No one is immune from occasional indigestion or heartburn. But if you’re finding that these troubles are getting in the way of your daily activities, remember that a range of treatment options are available. Making a few simple lifestyle changes can help you enjoy life and avoid those troubling stomach grumbles. However, a more constant acid reflux problem may be the sign of a heart condition, and should be brought to the attention of a medical professional.

please refer to your benefit material for more information. For immediate assistance, call 1.844.880.9137.