

Douse The Fire Of GERD

Reduce damaging acid reflux to avoid complications.

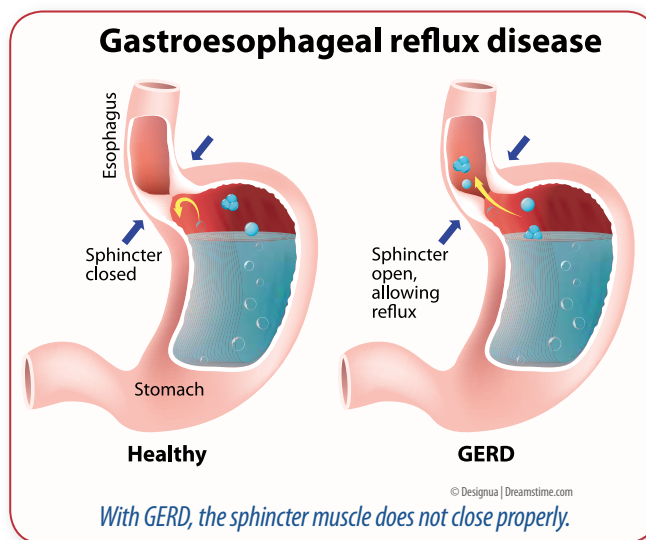
Too much pizza or going to bed on an overly full stomach can lead to annoying heartburn. While occasional heartburn isn't cause for concern, if you feel the burn more than twice a week for a few weeks, you could have GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). GERD affects more than 20 percent of people and it becomes more common with age.

"Over time, weaker contractions in the esophagus can lead to acid reflux and the sensation of heartburn," says Kevin Ghassemi, MD, UCLA Center for Esophageal Disorders. "The acid itself can injure the esophagus and lead to other complications."

The esophagus is a tube-like organ through which food travels to reach the stomach. When we swallow something, be it food, liquid or pills, involuntary muscles expand and contract to move the substance down the tube in a wave-like motion called peristalsis. At the bottom of the esophagus is the lower esophageal sphincter, or LES, a muscular ring that functions like a valve. The LES relaxes and opens to allow food into the stomach then closes to prevent back flow from the stomach. When the LES weakens it doesn't close completely, allowing acidic stomach fluids to wash back into the esophagus causing acid reflux.

Complications from acid reflux include risk for esophageal cancer

It is possible to have GERD without feeling the burning effects of acid reflux. That is because some seniors may lose the ability to sense the burn or taste of the refluxing fluids. Other symptoms of GERD include trouble swallowing, food getting caught, persistent dry coughing, sore throat or worsening dental disease. Left



untreated, refluxing stomach acid can damage the lining of the esophagus.

"Barrett's esophagus is a condition that changes the normal cells that line the esophagus into cells that look like those of the small intestine," explains Dr. Ghassemi. "It's a response to chronic injury and acid is the most common chronic injurious element that the esophagus could experience."

Intestinal-type cells in the esophagus have a small risk of becoming cancer cells. Because of this, it is recommended that people with Barrett's esophagus be screened regularly for cellular changes.

Other complications from untreated GERD include the formation of ulcers in the esophagus, another consequence of stomach acid. Sometimes these ulcers can unknowingly bleed, so it's important check for this if ulcers appear. Acid damage to the esophagus can also cause scarring leading to blockages (called strictures) that can cause pills or food to get stuck.

Medications with a caveat

There are many over-the-counter (OTC) medications that can treat acid reflux, including antacids such as Tums® and Maalox®. Antacids neutral-

ize stomach acid and typically offer short-term relief. Other treatments available without prescription are histamine antagonists. These medica-

tions reduce acid production in the stomach and include Zantac®, Pepcid® and Tagamet®.

Physicians typically recommend trying OTC medications for a couple of weeks and then stopping to see if symptoms return. If they do, you may need something stronger. Proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs) such as Prilosec® and Nexium® are commonly prescribed and work well for most people. They do have a downside. PPIs reduce acid production, but the body needs that acid to properly absorb calcium.

Long-term use of PPIs may carry some risk, which is why the common treatment regime is to take PPIs for a couple of months, then reduce the dosage or discontinue the medication. If symptoms don't return for several months, some people might only need to take the medication on an as-needed basis. If symptoms persist or worsen, there are surgical options to consider.

Lifestyle strategies to reduce acid reflux

Avoiding certain foods and making some other lifestyle changes can reduce mild acid reflux and negate the need to take any medications. Here are some options to try:

- **Lose weight.** Too much pressure on the stomach can prevent the LES from closing properly, leading to acid reflux.
- **Avoid tight-fitting clothes.** Squeezing the waist can increase pressure on the stomach and force stomach contents into the esophagus.
- **Walk after eating.** An easy stroll can help speed digestion and reduce bloating.
- **Eliminate culprit foods.** Citrus fruits, tomato products, vinegar, wine and chocolate commonly cause acid reflux. But, not all have to be eliminated, only those that cause a problem. ■