

## Medications, Diet and Lifestyle Changes Can Help Control Acid Reflux

More than 15-million Americans experience heartburn every day. This burning sensation in the chest is a classic sign of gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD. Other symptoms include a lingering sour taste in the mouth and a dry cough. Some people vomit food or feel as if food is stuck in their throat or chest.

“GERD occurs for a variety of reasons,” says Kevin Ghassemi, MD, associate director of clinical programs at the UCLA Center for Esophageal Disorders. “One of the most common causes is a weakened sphincter that allows stomach acid or food to flow back into the esophagus. Unfortunately, we’re not sure why this valve malfunctions in some people.”

Heartburn may seem like a mere annoyance, but Dr. Ghassemi stresses that the underlying cause — acid reflux — is a serious condition. “If not properly treated, GERD can cause severe complications such as esophagitis or inflammation, a narrowing of the esophagus, breathing problems, and even increase the risk for cancer of the esophagus,” he says.

Some people find relief with over-the-counter heartburn medications like antacids. However, Dr. Ghassemi recommends contacting your physician if you’re regularly reaching for these medicines more than once a week or still have symptoms after taking them. “You could have another esophageal disorder that requires a different treatment,” he says.

Doctors typically diagnose GERD based on a history of symptoms and how well those symptoms respond to prescribed treatment. Prescription-strength medications, such as proton pump inhibitors, reduce stomach acid and help the esophagus heal.

GERD can be a chronic health condition that requires lifelong treatment, much like high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Some people are able to stop taking medications after making dietary and lifestyle changes. “If you’re overweight, losing as little as 5-to-10 percent of your body weight can dramatically improve symptoms,” says Nancee Jaffe, MS, RD, a registered dietitian at the UCLA Digestive Health and Nutrition Clinic.

People who have GERD should consider avoiding foods and drinks that stimulate acid production, including citrus fruits and juices, tomato-based sauces, spicy foods, alcohol, fatty foods and caffeinated drinks. Jaffe also recommends eating smaller meals throughout the day, not eating within three hours of bedtime and elevating your head at night either with a wedge pillow or with lifts placed under the head of your bed.

“It’s important to know that nobody is immune to GERD,” Dr. Ghassemi says. “Overweight and older people might be more likely to have it, but I see it all the time in physically fit, younger people, too.”



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