

Information about

Heartburn (Oesophageal Reflux)

What is heartburn?

Heartburn is very common. Almost everyone has it at some time. It is a feeling of discomfort or burning or even pain felt rising up from the lower chest to the neck. Some people call it indigestion. Doctors call it gastrooesophageal reflux disease, or reflux or GORD for short.

Reflux is due to stomach acid rising up to the oesophagus where it can cause pain and inflammation. Occasionally reflux is associated with food or fluid coming into the mouth. This is called regurgitation.

If reflux symptoms occur regularly, say a few days a week or even every day, they may be distressing and need treatment.

Does my diet cause heartburn?

Many people who have reflux have symptoms no matter what they eat. Sometimes, however, the foods we eat can make reflux worse. Problem foods include large meals, fatty foods, chocolate, coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, cola drinks and peppermint. Some people know that a particular food gives them heartburn. You should avoid food situations that you know can cause you trouble. For example, don't have a meal just before going to bed or drink a lot of coffee at the end of the day. People generally do benefit from losing weight if they are overweight.

Do I need any tests?

Reflux disease is a diagnosis based on symptoms and special tests are not usually necessary unless you have alarm features such as weight loss, difficulty or pain with swallowing or vomiting – especially if there is any blood in it.

Reflux is common and doctors know a lot about the cause and how to treat it. If you have any of the alarm features above, or if medication does not give sufficient benefit, you should speak with your doctor about a test called an “endoscopy.”

At endoscopy, a doctor can inspect the inside of your oesophagus using a flexible tube. Based on this, a change in your treatment may be suggested. Rarely, further tests are needed to check the muscles in the oesophagus or the duration that acid refluxes up from the stomach.

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“Treatment is very effective and safe.”



How is reflux treated?

Which treatment depends on how severe your symptoms are. People who have mild or infrequent symptoms often respond to antacids which neutralize the acid produced by the stomach. Other people may require drugs that reduce the amount of acid the stomach produces. You can buy some of these medications over the counter on the advice of your pharmacist. To get others you need a prescription from your doctor. Treatment is very effective and safe.

Will I need to take medication forever?

Unfortunately most people who have reflux symptoms continue to have trouble if they don't take medication. However, you may not need to take your medication every day. Many patients are able to take their treatment on an "as required" basis. If you think this would suit you best, discuss it with your doctor.

Are there surgical options for treating reflux?

A small percentage of people require surgery for control of their reflux disease. The surgery is performed through a "key-hole" approach called laparoscopy. Surgery is usually reserved for patients who have severe symptoms or those whose symptoms are not relieved adequately with medication alone or those who do not want to take medications long-term.

Digestive Health Foundation

The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is committed to promoting better health for all Australians through education and community health programs related to the digestive system. The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia (GESA). GESA is the professional body representing the specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in gastrointestinal disorders. GI disorders are the most common health related problems affecting the community.

Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.

Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website - www.gesa.org.au

dhf

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