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Heartburn, or acid indigestion, is one of the most common medical conditions in the United States. It affects more than 60 million adults. Heartburn pain can severely limit daily activities, have an adverse effect on the patient's quality of life and play a role with their asthma or allergic symptoms.

What does heartburn feel like?

People with heartburn generally describe one or more of the following symptoms:

- | a burning chest pain that begins at the breastbone or mid-chest and moves up towards the throat
- | a feeling of fluid or liquids coming back into the mouth or throat
- | an acid or bitter taste in the back of the throat
- | an increase in the severity of pain behind the breastbone, especially when laying down or bending over

What causes heartburn?

Heartburn is caused when strong acidic stomach juices go backwards into the esophagus. The esophagus is a tube which connects the mouth to the stomach. At the bottom of the esophagus and the opening of the stomach, there is a valve called the lower esophageal sphincter. This valve normally keeps the stomach acid in the stomach and out of the esophagus. When it is functioning normally, this valve opens like a door and allows food into the stomach, but not in the same way. However, at times this sphincter relaxes and allows the stomach juices to flow backwards into the esophagus giving patients their symptoms.

Various lifestyle and dietary factors can contribute to heartburn. These triggers vary from person to person, but the most common factors include the following:

Eating/Dietary Habits

- | Eating foods such as citrus fruits, chocolate, peppermint, tomatoes, raw onions, garlic, black pepper, fatty or specify foods
- | drinking beverages such as coffee, tea, citrus juices and caffienated or carbonated beverages
- | drinking alcoholic beverages, particularly before bedtime
- | eating less than 2 hours before bedtime

(see end of article for a more detailed list of foods which can cause heartburn)

Certain positions

- | lying down, especially within 2 hours after eating
- | bending over

Medical reasons

- | pregnancy
- | hiatal hernia
- | taking certain medications i.e. bisphosphates including Actonel and Fosamax, iron salts, potassium salts, certain antibiotics, pain medications, NSAIDs which include aspirin, Motrin, Advil and Aleve

### Lifestyle habits

- | being overweight
- | smoking
- | certain types of exercise/body positions
- | hectic lifestyle
- | wearing restrictive or tight-fitting clothing around the waist

### What can I do to treat or relieve my heartburn?

With proper medication and medical advice, most heartburn sufferers can effectively treat and relieve their heartburn symptoms. Many heartburn sufferers significantly reduce their risk of getting heartburn by avoiding the trigger foods and behaviors that affect them most. Below is a list of foods which can aggravate heartburn symptoms.

#### avoid these:

orange juice  
lemon  
lemonade  
grapefruit juice  
cranberry juice  
tomato juice

mashed potatoes  
French fries  
raw onions  
potato salad

macaroni & cheese  
spaghetti with marinara sauce

sour cream  
milkshakes  
ice cream  
cottage cheese, regular

ground beef/chuck  
marbled sirloin  
chicken nuggets  
buffalo wings

#### use with discretion:

low-acid orange juice  
apple cider  
peaches  
blueberries  
raspberries  
strawberries  
grapes  
cranberries (dried)  
garlic  
cooked onions  
leeks  
sauerkraut  
scallions  
  
garlic bread  
muffin  
granola cereal

yogurt  
2% milk  
skim milk  
frozen yogurt  
low-fat cottage cheese  
cheddar cheese  
mozzarella cheese

lean ground beef  
chicken salad  
scrambled eggs in butter  
fried eggs

#### usually not a problem

apples (fresh or dried)  
apple juice  
bananas

carrots  
cabbage  
peas  
broccoli  
green beans  
baked potatoes  
multi-grain bread  
white bread  
cornbread  
brown rice  
white rice  
couscous  
graham crackers  
saltine crackers  
pretzels  
rice cakes  
oatmeal  
frosted cereals  
bran-based cereals

fat-free cream cheese  
feta cheese  
goat cheese  
ff sour cream  
low-fat soy cheese

extra lean ground beef  
London broil  
chicken breast  
(skinless)

	fried fish tuna salad beef or pork hot dogs ham nuts, peanut butter baked beans	egg whites egg substitutes fresh fish prep w/o added fat
chocolate corn chips potato chips butter cookies (high-fat) brownies doughnuts creamy salad dressing oil & vinegar dressing	low-fat cookies ketchup	baked potato chips cookies (fat-free) jelly beans red licorice low-fat salad dressing
liquor wine coffee tea	non-alcoholic wine beer non-alcoholic beer cola root beer	mineral water

#### What do I do if lifestyle adjustments and a change in my diet is not enough?

If a patient still has symptoms despite changing their lifestyle and diet, the next line of defense is medication. Some heartburn sufferers can find relief with over-the-counter (OTC) medications, and some require prescription medications. If a patient has episodic heartburn in which infrequent bouts of heartburn occur, OTC treatments including antacids or H2-antagonists (such as Pepcid) may be enough to control symptoms. The effect of the H-2 blockers generally last for 6-12 hours. If a patient has more frequent heartburn that occurs 2 or more days a week, they may require prescription H-2 blockers or meds called proton pump inhibitors (PPIs). PPIs such as Nexium or Prilosec are very powerful inhibitors of stomach acid production. However, for these medications to be effective they need to be taken at least half-hour before a large meal.

#### What do I do if I still have problems despite changes in my diet and medication?

People who do not get complete relief through change in their diet and lifestyle may require a more thorough evaluation. For this patient, heartburn could be a symptom of a more serious condition called gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). If this condition is left untreated, it could lead to a wide range of problems including esophagitis, which is inflammation or an ulcer of the esophagus. Some patients can actually develop a stricture or narrowing of the esophagus due to scar tissue. This narrowing can lead to problems with swallowing food or pills. Significant heartburn left untreated also can play a role in asthma, pneumonia, voice issues, chronic cough, sore throat and dental problems. Fortunately, the majority of heartburn sufferers can be treated adequately and safely.