

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

REFERENCE



What is GERD?

According to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearing House (NDDIC), gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, occurs when the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) does not close properly and stomach contents leak back, or reflux, into the esophagus. The LES is a ring of muscle at the bottom of the esophagus that acts like a valve between the esophagus and stomach. The esophagus carries food from the mouth to the stomach. Anyone, including infants, children, and pregnant women, can have GERD.

Symptoms of GERD

The main symptoms of GERD are persistent heartburn – when refluxed stomach acid touches the lining of the esophagus, it causes a burning sensation in the chest or throat – and acid regurgitation, but some people have GERD without heartburn. Instead, they may experience any or all of the following:

- > Pain in the chest
- > Hoarseness in the morning
- > Trouble swallowing

You may feel like you have food stuck in your throat or like you are choking or your throat is tight. GERD can also cause a dry cough and bad breath.

What Causes GERD?

No one knows why people have GERD. A hiatal hernia – the upper part of the stomach above the diaphragm – may contribute. The diaphragm helps the LES keep acid from coming up into the esophagus. When a hiatal hernia is present, it is easier for the acid to come up and cause reflux. A hiatal hernia can happen in people of any age.

Other factors that may contribute to GERD include:

- > Alcohol use
- > Overweight
- > Pregnancy
- > Smoking

Also, certain foods can be associated with reflux events and should be avoided if GERD is suspected or diagnosed:

- > Citrus fruits
- > Chocolate
- > Drinks with caffeine
- > Fatty and fried foods
- > Garlic and onions
- > Mint flavorings
- > Spicy and tomato-based foods, like spaghetti sauce, chili and pizza



GERD in Children

Studies* show that GERD is common and may be overlooked in infants and children. It can cause the following:

- > Repeated vomiting
- > Coughing
- > Other respiratory problems

Most infants grow out of GERD by the time they are one year old. If the problem occurs regularly and causes discomfort, you should talk to your child's doctor. Your doctor may recommend simple strategies for avoiding reflux, like burping the infant several times during feeding or keeping the infant in an upright position for 30 minutes after feeding.

If your child is older, the doctor may recommend avoiding the same foods adults should avoid. Avoiding food two to three hours before bed may also help and the doctor may recommend the child sleep with its head raised. If these changes do not work, the doctor may prescribe medicine for your child and in rare cases, a child may need surgery.

TIPS



Treatment

Contact your physician if you have had heartburn or any of the other symptoms listed above. Your physician may recommend an internist, a doctor who specializes in internal medicine, or a gastroenterologist, a doctor who treats diseases of the stomach and intestines.

Depending on how severe your GERD is, treatment may involve one or more of the following lifestyle changes:

- > Stop smoking
- > Avoid alcohol
- > Lose weight if needed
- > Eat small meals
- > Wear loose-fitting clothes
- > Avoid lying down for three hours after a meal
- > Raise the head of your bed six to eight inches by putting blocks of wood under the bedposts – just using extra pillows will not help.

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If the changes mentioned previously don't work, your physician may recommend the following medications:

- > Antacids
- > Foaming agents
- > Proton pump inhibitors
- > Prokinetics
- > H2 blockers

If your heartburn does not improve with lifestyle changes or drugs, you may need additional tests and/or surgery. Please contact your physician to discuss what treatment options are best for you.

For more information about GERD, visit the NDDIC at <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/index.htm>.

For more information about Nationwide Better Health, visit nwbetterhealth.com. Or contact your benefits representative.



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* Jung AD. Gastroesophageal reflux in infants and children. *American Family Physician*. 2001;64(11):1853–1860.