

Gastroesophageal Reflux

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Stomach acid reflux, also known as gastroesophageal reflux and hiatal hernia, is a common problem. Fortunately, there are several relatively easy things you can do to control it. This guide explains what reflux is, how it affects your health, and how you can treat it.

What Is Reflux?

If you have stomach acid reflux it means that acid is backing up from your stomach into your esophagus (see figure on back). Reflux is most likely to be a problem during sleep or whenever you are lying down. However, it can also happen in other situations, such as while you are straining or bending over.

How Does It Affect My Health?

A certain amount of reflux is normal, but too much can cause burning in the chest, heartburn, a bitter taste in the mouth. Less well-known respiratory symptoms of GER include a cough, throat clearing, postnasal drip, and hoarseness. When stomach acid backs up into the esophagus, through a reflex mechanism, it can trigger constriction in the chest, and cause secretions to form in the back part of the nose. Reflux commonly makes symptoms of asthma and nasal allergies worse, especially at night or early in the morning. Gastroesophageal reflux is commonly found in association with asthma and nasal allergies. Some asthma medications may make reflux worse. About 20% of people with severe reflux causing a cough will have no heartburn. Sometimes special tests are needed to pinpoint the cause of reflux. The results of these tests may lead to changes in your treatment plan. Reflux can and will make asthma worse.

Non-Medical Treatment

1. Since the likelihood of reflux is increased after a meal, it is important to avoid eating or drinking for two to three hours before going to bed, except for taking any medicine prescribed by your doctor. Also remember to avoid lying down after any meal.
2. Elevate the head of your bed 6-8 inches. Do this by putting wooden blocks or bricks under the head of the bed, not by propping yourself up with pillows. Using pillows this way makes reflux worse. Although elevating the head of your bed will not prevent reflux from occurring, it will reduce the damage caused by reflux by letting the acid drain back into your stomach.
3. Some patients may need to avoid foods and drinks that are known to make stomach acid reflux worse. These include fatty foods, alcohol, chocolate, caffeinated drinks (such as coffee, tea, and colas), peppermint and spearmint, and spices. If you are overweight, losing weight may also help.
4. Avoid unnecessary pressure around your abdomen by avoiding tight clothing, straining, and prolonged bending. It is also important to avoid constipation.

Medical Treatment

The recommendations given above are to supplement medications to successfully control stomach acid reflux. Although heartburn will rapidly improve with medical treatment, many people will require 3 to 6 months of therapy prior to feeling relief of cough, hoarseness and throat clearing. Additionally as many as 30% of people using medication once a day, while

having relief of heartburn, will not have respiratory reflux symptoms controlled. If reflux is a major problem for you, and if lifestyle changes and medicines do not control it, surgery may be an option.