

Heartburn

Heartburn Overview

Heartburn is an unpleasant condition, which causes burning sensations in the throat, chest and oesophagus. Heartburn occurs when stomach acid rises up into the throat and oesophagus (which connects the mouth to the stomach) where it causes a burning pain. It affects 25-30 percent of adults in the UK¹ and as many as 72 percent of women in the last three months of pregnancy².

Heartburn is one of the most common symptoms of gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD). Although GORD is not considered to be serious, it is a chronic condition and can damage the lining of the oesophagus. This is called reflux oesophagitis. (Oesophagitis simply means inflammation of the oesophagus.)

Heartburn causes

Acid reflux occurs if the muscular valve between the oesophagus and the stomach doesn't work properly. This happens most frequently 60 to 90 minutes after meals, when the muscular valve is more likely to relax and allow stomach acid to leak into the oesophagus.

You're also more likely to get an attack of heartburn if you bend forwards after eating, go straight to bed after a meal, or if you wear clothes that fit tightly around your chest and waist.

Like indigestion, heartburn can be caused by:

- Eating too much, too quickly or irregularly
- Drinking fizzy drinks or too much alcohol
- Eating rich or spicy food
- A stressful, busy lifestyle
- Hiatus hernia

Heartburn during pregnancy

Heartburn during pregnancy is partly due to the hormone, progesterone, which slows down digestion and causes the muscular valve between the oesophagus and the stomach to relax. As a result, stomach acid is more likely to leak into the oesophagus and cause a burning pain in your chest and throat.

As the pregnancy progresses, the pressure on your stomach from the growing baby increases and this can force stomach acid into the oesophagus, again causing gastro-oesophageal reflux.

Heartburn Symptoms

The most common symptoms of heartburn are a burning sensation in the chest, stomach or throat. Some people feel heartburn as a deep pain within their chest, towards the back.

You may also have a hot, sour and acidic taste in the back of the throat, which is difficult to swallow down. Some people experience pain or discomfort when swallowing.

Heartburn symptoms can last for several hours at a time and eating can make it worse. It can cause sleepless nights, especially for pregnant women, as lying down makes it easier for stomach acid to leak into the oesophagus.

Heartburn Prevention

Heartburn is associated with stress, unhealthy diets and over-eating. As well as being particularly common during pregnancy, you are more likely to suffer from heartburn if you have a busy lifestyle, you are a smoker or you are overweight.

Therefore simple lifestyle changes, such as a sensible diet, can help to reduce the frequency of heartburn. Some ways to help prevent heartburn include:

- Eat and drink in moderation.
- Avoid rich or spicy food
- Avoid 'trigger foods' such as citrus fruits, onions, beans and pulses, as well as perhaps unexpected culprits: cabbage, tomatoes and cucumber
- Avoid fizzy drinks, wine and neat spirits
- Cut down on caffeine as this may relax the muscular valve between the oesophagus and the stomach
- Eat your evening meal at least two hours before going to bed, giving your meal a chance to digest
- Raise the head of the bed by a few inches
- If you're overweight, it will help to lose a few pounds.

Heartburn Treatment

In a recent independent review by an international medical panel, calcium and magnesium based antacids were recommended as the first line of treatment for heartburn sufferers¹.

An antacid formulation can help to neutralise excess stomach acid and relieve the burning pain of heartburn, even during pregnancy. (You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist before using any medicines during pregnancy.)

Some remedies also offer dual action products that combine calcium carbonate and magnesium carbonate to neutralise excess acid, plus an alginate which forms a protective barrier over the contents of the stomach and helps to prevent acid leaking into the oesophagus.

H2 blockers are another type of remedy that work by reducing the amount of acid that your stomach produces.

If neither antacids nor H2 blockers stop your symptoms, your GP may prescribe other types of medicine.

Sources:

1. Kennedy T, Jones R. The prevalence of gastro-oesophageal reflux symptoms in the UK population and the consultation behaviour of patients with these symptoms. *Aliment Pharmacol Ther* 2000; 14: 1589-94
2. Marrero JM, Goggin PM, de Caestecker JS, Pearce JM, Maxwell JD. Determinants of pregnancy heartburn. *Br J Obstet Gynaecol* 1992;99: 731-4
3. Seager JM, Hawkey CJ: **ABC of the upper gastrointestinal tract: Indigestion and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.** *Bmj* 2001, **323**:1236-1239.
4. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Indigestion/Pages/Causes.aspx?url=Pages/What-is-it.aspx>

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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