Heartburn and GERD — Treatment and Prevention

Heartburn is a common condition that regularly affects more than 60 million Americans.

Heartburn is a burning sensation in the lower chest. It is the main symptom of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). GERD is the abnormal backflow (reflux) of stomach acid and juices into the esophagus, the tube that leads from the throat to the stomach.

Many people turn to expensive prescriptions to treat heartburn. But few people suffer from heartburn that is serious enough to require a prescription. There are lifestyle changes and Over-The-Counter (OTC) medications that can offer relief.

SYMPTOMS

Heartburn symptoms often occur after overeating or lying down after a big meal. They may last for a few minutes or a few hours. The severity of symptoms depends on the esophageal sphincter, the amount of acid entering the esophagus, and how much saliva is available to neutralize it.

Symptoms include one or more of the following:

- A burning feeling starting in the lower chest that may move up the throat
- The feeling of food coming back up
- A sour or bitter taste in the throat
- Pain that increases when bending over, lying down, exercising, or lifting heavy objects

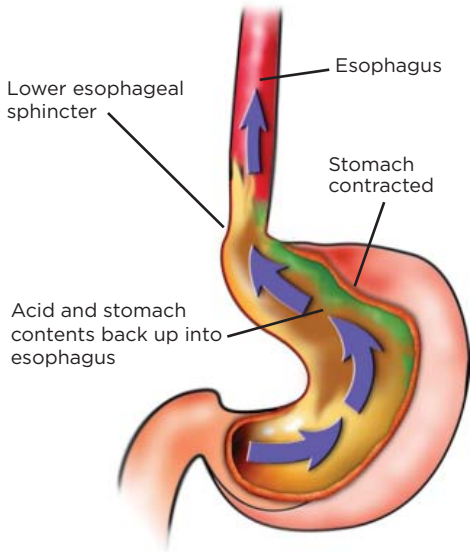
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The following factors may contribute to heartburn or GERD.

- Obesity
- Pregnancy
- Exercise immediately after eating
- Smoking
- Alcohol use
- Carbonated or caffeinated beverages and decaffeinated coffee
- High-fat and high-carbohydrate foods
- Some muscle relaxers and blood pressure medications

DIAGNOSIS

Heartburn can feel like the pain associated with a heart attack. Never assume that chest pain is heartburn or ingestion. Seek medical care if you're not sure. The doctor will ask about your symptoms and perform a physical exam.



In GERD, the valve at the top of the stomach does not close tightly enough. This allows the contents of the stomach to move up into the esophagus.

SELECTHEALTH FORMULARY MEDICATIONS TO TREAT HEARTBURN AND GERD

Acid Reducers (H-2 Blockers)	Famotidine (generic for Pepcid®) Ranitidine (generic for Zantac®)	Free (zero copay) for monthly fills
Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs)	Omeprazole (generic for Prilosec®)	Tier 1 (GenericSample℠)*
	Prevacid® Aciphex®	Tier 2

*SelectHealth offers a program called GenericSample that allows members to try certain generic prescription drugs for FREE (on a one-time basis per drug) through participating retail pharmacies. Additional refills of omeprazole will then be available at a Tier 1 copay.

TREATMENT

Heartburn treatment aims to decrease the number of episodes and complications. Therapies focus on stopping the flow of acid back into the esophagus and neutralizing or decreasing production of stomach acid.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

The following lifestyle changes can help prevent heartburn.

- Keep a food diary of what you eat and when symptoms occur
- Avoid foods that provoke symptoms, such as:
  - High-fat foods
  - Spicy foods
  - Chocolate and peppermint
  - Citrus fruits, onions, tomatoes, and peppers
  - Alcohol, coffee, and carbonated drinks
- Try eating smaller portions
- Chew sugarless gum after meals to neutralize stomach acid
- Allow two or three hours between meals and before going to bed
- Obtain and maintain a healthy weight
- Don't smoke cigarettes
- Avoid belts and clothing that are too tight
- Learn and practice stress-management techniques

WHEN TO SEE YOUR DOCTOR

To prevent long-term complications from GERD, you should call your doctor if you experience heartburn that requires self-treatment more than twice a week or if symptoms aren't relieved by OTC medications.

HEARTBURN/GERD MEDICATIONS

	Antacids	Acid Reducers (H2 Blockers)	Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs)
How it Works	Neutralizes acid in the stomach	Reduces the production of stomach acid	Shuts down acid producing pumps
Type of Treatment	Relieves heartburn fast	Quickly prevents or relieves heartburn	Treats frequent heartburn (not for immediate relief)
Dosing	As needed, may require repeat dosing	As needed (up to twice daily)	Once daily (may take one to three days for effectiveness)
OTC Products	Tums® Rolaids® Mylanta® Maalox®	Zantac™ Pepcid® Tagamet® Axid®	Prilosec OTC®
Rx Products	n/a	Zantac™ Pepcid® Tagamet® Axid® (higher strengths)	Omeprizole (Prilosec®) Aciphex® Prevacid® Protonix® Nexium®

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SOURCES

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