

10 Tips to Prevent Reflux Disease

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Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)— what we call “acid indigestion” or “heartburn”—is caused in most cases by a weakening or malfunction of the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), the tiny valve that separates the esophagus from the stomach. Following these tips can help you control or prevent GERD.

1 Avoid trigger foods and medications. Avoid fatty and fried foods; carbonated beverages; garlic and onions; chocolate, peppermint and spearmint; acidic vegetables including tomatoes and tomato sauces; and citrus fruits. Among medications, some muscle relaxers and blood-pressure medications are known to cause GERD.

2 Eat smaller, more frequent meals. Large meals expand the stomach and can increase upward pressure on the LES. The same goes for water: Drink smaller amounts throughout the day rather than a few large glasses full. Chewing a stick of gum 30 minutes after a meal stimulates the production of saliva, which in turn can neutralize and dilute stomach acid.

3 Avoid lying down right after a meal. Wait 2-3 hours before retiring. Even bending over at the waist soon after eating increases pressure on the stomach and LES. When you're upright, gravity not only keeps the stomach's contents from backing up but also encourages them to flow on down into the intestines. Take a walk after meals and avoid bedtime snacks.

4 Sleep with head and torso elevated. Lying down flat causes the stomach's contents to press against the LES, especially if you tend to sleep on your right side. Having the head and shoulders higher than the stomach helps gravity keep your last meal where it belongs. At the head of the bed, either



position a solid foam wedge under the mattress or else secure wooden blocks under the bed's legs at that end. Just using extra pillows may not do the trick.

5 Quit smoking and avoid alcohol. Nicotine can weaken the LES, while smoking stimulates stomach-acid production. Alcohol, too, increases the production of acid and can relax the stomach sphincter.

6 Control your weight. Obesity generally increases abdominal pressure, thus boosting the chances that stomach acid will be forced up into the esophagus. Losing weight may be the single best way to decrease reflux.

7 Wear loose-fitting clothes. Belts, waistbands and slenderizing undergarments, if too tight, also can push food back up into the esophagus. Take particular care to wear loose-fitting bed clothes.

8 Keep a record of your symptoms. Record what triggered your acid-reflux episodes (their duration,

severity and symptoms), what gave relief and whether symptoms interfered with sleep or daily activities. This information helps your doctor to confirm the diagnosis and determine whether the recommended treatment is effectively reducing your symptoms.

9 Relax. Stress not only can increase stomach-acid production, but also can lead to behaviors that trigger heartburn, such as overeating. Get enough sleep, eat a balanced diet and consider learning some visualization, breathing or meditation techniques. Exercise can also help, if your workout is done at least two hours after a meal.

10 Seek treatment for chronic GERD. Investigate other options if symptoms persist even after avoiding the recognized triggers.

Testing to examine the lining of the esophagus and stomach can help your doctor determine if inflammation and possibly ulceration are present. Medications to decrease stomach acid production are usually effective. If medical treatment fails and symptoms are severe, further testing can be employed to quantify the severity of reflux and better understand the mechanisms of ongoing symptoms. As a last resort, your doctor may recommend surgery—usually performed laparoscopically—to strengthen the LES.

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