

GERD (Gastro Esophageal Reflux Disease)

Gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD) is a chronic digestive disease that occurs when stomach acid or, occasionally, bile flows back (refluxes) into your esophagus. The backwash of acid irritates the lining of your esophagus and causes GERD signs and symptoms.

When you swallow food, the lower esophageal sphincter — a circular band of muscle around the bottom part of your esophagus — relaxes to allow food and liquid to flow down into your stomach. Then it closes again. If this muscle does not function well, stomach acid can go up the esophagus causing heartburn and other symptoms. Excessive acid in the esophagus causes inflammation (esophagitis). Over time, this inflammation can create other serious complications.

Signs and symptoms of GERD include any, or a combination of, the following:

- A burning sensation in your chest (heartburn), sometimes spreading to your throat
- Regurgitation of food or a sour taste in your mouth (acid reflux)
- Chest pain
- Difficulty swallowing food
- A dry, on-going cough
- Hoarseness or sore throat
- Sensation of a lump in the throat

Both heartburn and acid reflux are common digestive conditions that most people experience from time to time. When these signs and symptoms occur more than twice each week or interfere with your daily life, doctors term this GERD.

Conditions that can increase your risk of GERD include:

- Obesity
- Hiatal hernia
- Pregnancy
- Smoking
- Dry mouth
- Asthma
- Diabetes
- Delayed stomach emptying
- Certain conditions such as scleroderma and Zollinger-Ellison syndrome

When should you see a doctor?

Most people can manage the discomfort of heartburn with lifestyle changes and over-the-counter medications. But for people with GERD, these remedies may offer only temporary relief. People with GERD may need stronger medications, even surgery, to reduce symptoms.

Make an appointment with your doctor if you experience severe or frequent GERD symptoms twice a week or more. You can start by first seeing your family doctor. Your doctor may recommend that see a gastroenterologist.

Get immediate medical attention if you have chest pain, especially with shortness of breath or jaw or arm pain. These may be signs and symptoms of a heart attack.

Tips for getting the most from your visit to your gastroenterologist

Because there's often a lot of ground to cover in your initial appointment, it's a good idea to:

- Write down any symptoms you're having, including any that may seem unrelated to the reason for which you scheduled the appointment
- Write down important personal information, including any major stresses or changes in your diet or life circumstances
- Make a list of all medications, as well as any vitamins or supplements you're taking
- Bring a family member or friend with you to the appointment, if possible. Sometimes it can be difficult to remember all the information you'll need. Someone who accompanies you may remember something that you missed or forgot
- Write down questions to ask your doctor

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