

# Gastro-Esophageal Reflux



## What is GERD?

If you experience a painful burning sensation in your chest after eating, you may have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). When you have GERD, stomach acid feels as if it's backing up toward your mouth. Heartburn is a classic symptom of GERD, but you may have other symptoms, such as:

- Frequent heartburn or heartburn at night
- Sour-tasting fluid backing up into your mouth
- Frequent need for antacids
- Frequent burping or belching
- Symptoms that worsen after you eat, bend over, or lie down
- Difficult or painful swallowing

Note: chest pain caused by GERD may feel similar to that caused by heart problems, so be sure to have any chest pain evaluated by your doctor.

A visit to your health care provider may include questions about your lifestyle tests such as x-ray, endoscopy (examination of the stomach through a tube called an endoscope), or blood tests. This helps determine the cause of your symptoms and helps your health care provider choose the best treatment for you.

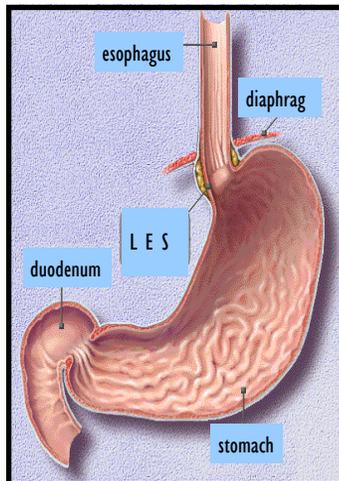
### Your Upper Digestive System

When you eat, food travels from your mouth to your stomach through a tube called the esophagus. At the lower end of the esophagus is a muscle ring called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES). The LES acts like a one-way door, allowing food to pass through to the stomach.

A healthy LES closes quickly to stop food and stomach acids from moving back into the esophagus.

A weak LES lets acidic stomach contents flow back into the esophagus. This is called reflux.

Smoking, pressure on the stomach, and certain foods, medications, or medical problems can weaken the LES, causing reflux. The constantly refluxing acids can irritate the esophagus, causing burning, pressure or inflammation. Stomach acid may eventually damage the esophagus.



## What You Can Do

### Change Your Eating Habits

Certain foods can increase the acid in your stomach or relax the LES, making GERD more likely. Try to avoid:

- Coffee, tea, and cola drinks (with or without caffeine)
- Carbonated drinks
- Fatty or spicy foods
- Mint or chocolate
- Onions and tomatoes
- Any other foods that seem to increase your symptoms

### Avoid Tobacco and Alcohol

Tobacco and alcohol can also make GERD more likely and worsen the symptoms. Try avoiding both and see if your condition improves.

### Raise Your Head

Reflux often strikes when you are laying down flat, because stomach fluid can flow back more easily. Try raising the head of your bed 4-6" by sliding blocks or books under the legs at the head of your bed, or place a wedge under the mattress. Tilt the whole bed or mattress, rather than trying to sleep on several pillows, which increases pressure on your stomach and can actually make GERD worse.

### Ask Your Health Care Provider About Medications

Some medications can reduce stomach acid and improve the working of your digestive system. Other medications should be avoided because they may make GERD worse.

### If Surgery is Needed

In very rare cases, GERD may not respond to lifestyle changes or medications. Surgery may then be necessary. Your health care provider can give you more information.

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