

# Heartburn and indigestion

Heartburn is a painful, burning feeling rising up from the stomach or lower chest towards the throat. Indigestion is an uncomfortable feeling in the stomach. Medicines, and in some cases simple lifestyle changes, can relieve and prevent heartburn and indigestion.

## Heartburn

Heartburn occurs when stomach acid refluxes (flows back up) into the oesophagus (food pipe) and irritates the inner lining of the oesophagus. This reflux happens when the valve that separates the oesophagus and the stomach does not close properly. Symptoms are often made worse by lying down or bending over.

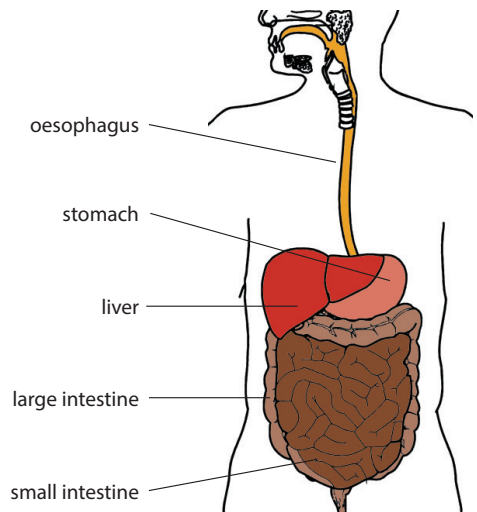
### Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease

Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD) is the medical term given to frequent heartburn. A person with GORD gets repeated reflux of stomach acid, which can cause damage to the lining of the oesophagus, called oesophagitis. Oesophagitis is a serious condition that needs medical attention. Read the *Important* section to see if you should discuss your heartburn with a doctor or pharmacist.

## Indigestion

Some people refer to heartburn as indigestion. However, indigestion is really a general term for uncomfortable stomach symptoms. It is usually related to eating or drinking. Almost everyone has indigestion sometimes.

### The digestive system



## Symptoms of reflux

People who get heartburn may also have other symptoms caused by acid reflux. The most common symptoms of acid reflux are:

- heartburn
- food or fluid from your stomach coming into your mouth
- an acid, sour or bitter taste in your mouth
- a sudden increase in saliva in your mouth.

## Risk factors

Some factors that can trigger or worsen heartburn are:

- certain foods (e.g. spicy or fatty foods, chocolate, onions, tomatoes, citrus)
- alcohol
- caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks)
- soft drinks
- a large meal
- eating quickly
- physical activity soon after a large meal
- lying down soon after eating
- stress or anxiety
- being overweight
- wearing tight clothing around your waist
- pregnancy, particularly late pregnancy
- smoking
- certain medical conditions (e.g. GORD, hiatus hernia, asthma)

- certain medicines (e.g. anti-inflammatory pain relievers, alendronate, risedronate, doxycycline, minocycline).

## Self care

Simple changes to diet and lifestyle can often prevent or reduce heartburn. Try to avoid things that trigger or worsen your symptoms.

## Helpful lifestyle tips

- Avoid foods that give you symptoms.
- Eat smaller meals.
- Eat slowly and chew food well.
- Drink less alcohol.
- Drink less caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks).
- Always swallow medicines with a glass of water.
- Don't slump in a chair, bend over or lie down soon after eating.
- Don't go to bed for 2 hours after eating.
- Don't do vigorous exercise for 2 hours after eating.
- Wear loose clothing around your waist.
- Raise the head of your bed or use a wedge pillow.
- Keep to a healthy weight.
- Don't smoke.
- Use relaxation techniques to manage stress.

## Medicines

Along with diet and lifestyle changes, many people need medicines to manage heartburn. Some people need to use these medicines every day, while others only take them occasionally. Some medicines are available from a pharmacist without a prescription.

Pharmacists can advise on the best medicine for you, and whether you should see a doctor. Some of these medicines may interfere with other medicines that you take. Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.

**Antacids** – neutralise stomach acid. They are used for quick relief of occasional heartburn.

**Alginates** – form a coating on top of stomach contents, which can reduce acid reflux. They are used for quick relief of occasional heartburn.

**H<sub>2</sub>-antagonists** – reduce the amount of acid in the stomach. They are used to relieve occasional reflux symptoms (e.g. ranitidine).

**Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs)** – reduce the amount of acid in the stomach. They are used to relieve frequent symptoms of reflux (e.g. esomeprazole, omeprazole, pantoprazole, lansoprazole, rabeprazole).

## Important

Heartburn and indigestion are common. Many healthy people experience these symptoms from time to time. Talk to a doctor or pharmacist if:

- it is the first time you have experienced reflux symptoms, especially if you are over 55 years of age or under 18 years of age
- you get heartburn or other symptoms of reflux on more than one day a week
- heartburn, pain or choking wakes you at night
- symptoms are getting worse or are severe
- symptoms are constant or keep returning, even with treatment
- it is hard or painful to swallow
- your bowel motions are black and tar-like, or have blood in them
- you vomit and your vomit looks like coffee grounds, or has blood in it
- you have lost weight and do not know why
- symptoms get worse with or after exercise
- you often have nausea, burping, a cough or sore throat.

**Note:** Heart attack can feel like heartburn or indigestion. See next page for *Warning signs of heart attack*.

## Warning signs of heart attack

Warning signs of heart attack vary from person-to-person and may include:

- pain, pressure, heaviness or tightness in your chest, neck, jaw, arm(s), back or shoulders
- a feeling of choking, nausea, dizziness, shortness of breath or a cold sweat.

If you have warning signs of heart attack that are severe, get worse quickly or have lasted 10 minutes, phone Triple Zero (000) for an ambulance.

## For more information

### Gastroenterological Society of Australia

Website: [www.gesa.org.au](http://www.gesa.org.au)

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)

### NPS MedicineWise

#### Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### Consumer Medicines Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.***

## Related Fact Cards

- » *Alcohol*
- » *Coughs*
- » *Pain relievers*
- » *Relaxation techniques*
- » *Smoking*
- » *Warning signs of heart attack*
- » *Weight and health*

## Your Self Care Pharmacy:

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