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ADULT HEALTH BULLETIN

NOVEMBER 2009

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: HEARTBURN

What You Should Know about Heartburn

It is estimated that one in ten Americans will suffer from heartburn at least once a week. Surprisingly, heartburn has nothing to do with the heart. Heartburn occurs when acid, normally restricted to the stomach, backs up into the esophagus, causing irritation.

Normally when you swallow, food and liquids are propelled by the muscles in the esophagus into the stomach. A specialized muscle sphincter at the end of the esophagus, called the lower esophageal sphincter, relaxes to allow food and liquid to flow down into the stomach. Then it tightens to prevent the contents of the stomach from backing up into the esophagus. For many people, this muscle weakens and allows stomach acid to back up, or "reflux", into the esophagus, causing injury and heartburn.

Reflux injury often occurs without symptoms at night because during sleep we don't swallow to clear the lower esophagus of acid and there is

no protective saliva present. Once the surface of the esophagus is damaged, heartburn symptoms occur with exposure to more acid and to other irritating gastric contents. Most people complain that heartburn is worse when they bend over or lie down. With long standing reflux injury, the lower esophagus can become scarred causing a narrowing. The damage can also result in pre-malignant, regrowth of the lining called Barrett's esophagus. The good news is that gastro-esophageal reflux and heartburn can be effectively treated with over-the-counter medication and lifestyle changes.

Symptoms of Heartburn

- A burning sensation in the chest behind the breastbone that occurs after eating or lying down
- A burning sensation in the back of your throat that has a hot, sour, salty, or acidic taste
- Trouble swallowing
- A feeling that food is "stuck" in the middle of your chest or throat
- A cough, sore throat, or hoarseness that won't go away
- Difficulty swallowing or food getting stuck in the esophagus while swallowing
- Pain when swallowing
- Unexplained loss of weight
- Vomiting, especially vomiting blood
- Black stool
- Anemia



There are some symptoms that may suggest the presence of serious complications of heartburn. If you have any of these "alarm" symptoms, seek medical attention immediately.

Continued on the back 

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Symptoms of a HEART ATTACK can be mistaken for heartburn. If you have the following symptoms, seek immediate medical attention.

- A feeling of fullness, tightness, dull pressure, or pain in the center of the chest
- Chest pain that comes on suddenly and continues to get worse
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Pain that spreads to your neck, shoulders, jaw, or arms
- Shortness of breath
- A cold sweat

Common Foods and Drinks that May Trigger Heartburn

- Alcohol
- Black pepper
- Chocolate
- Coffee
- Foods high in fat
- Fried foods
- Ketchup
- Mustard
- Orange juice and other citrus juices and foods
- Peppermint
- Tomato sauce
- Vinegar



Treatments and Lifestyle Changes to Reduce or Eliminate Heartburn

The following healthy lifestyle changes can provide effective heartburn relief.

- Wait at least three to four hours after you eat before you lie down. And never lie down with a full stomach or a stomach distended with gas from a carbonated beverage.
- Elevate the head of your bed on four inch blocks or use a specially designed wedge extending from your buttocks to your head. This allows gravity to keep acid and stomach contents from refluxing. (Don't substitute extra pillows or use a hospital bed to keep your head elevated.)
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Avoid clothes that fit too tightly, especially around the waist where they may put pressure on the abdomen
- Avoid foods and drinks that may trigger heartburn
- Eat smaller meals

- Don't smoke
- Medications that most effectively control acid and heal the esophagus are the proton pump inhibitors, or PPIs (for example, OTC Prevacid® 24HR, Prilosec OTC) and the prescription PPIs (omeprazole, esomeprazole, lansoprazole, deslanzaprazole, pantoprazole, and rabeprazole)
- Other medications that neutralize acid (e.g., Gaviscon, Maalox, Tums, Rolaids) or reduce stomach acid production (for example, Tagamet HB, Pepcid AC, Zantac 75) are helpful, but not as effective as the proton pump inhibitors.

10 Common Questions to Ask Your Doctor about Heartburn:

1. Is my case of heartburn mild or severe?
2. Are there any lifestyle changes you could recommend to me?
3. Are the over-the-counter medicines an option for me? If so, which ones do you recommend? How long should I take them?
4. Do I need prescription medicine?
5. What are some of the side effects of OTC and prescribed medications?
6. What are my options if nothing seems to work?
7. Do I show any signs of esophagitis or stricture?
8. Should you examine me for esophageal cancer?
9. If not now, will I need such an examination in the future?
10. Would surgery be an appropriate option to treat my gastro-esophageal reflux disease or GERD?

SOURCES:

- <http://www.webmd.com/heartburn-gerd/guide/heartburn-gerd-overview-facts>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/heartburn-gerd/DS00095>
- http://www.medicinenet.com/gastroesophageal_reflux_disease_gerd/article.htm

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