Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease

Many people occasionally experience heartburn, but for some people, it is a frequent or continual problem called gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD.

An article in the May 9, 2001, issue of JAMA reports that the majority of people with gastroesophageal reflux disease who participated in the study continue to use medication to control acid reflux years after initial medical treatment or surgery.

WHAT IS GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX?

Gastroesophageal reflux occurs when contents from the stomach, including acidic stomach juices, reflux (flow back) into the esophagus, the muscular tube that carries food and liquids down from the throat to the stomach. The most common symptom of gastroesophageal reflux is heartburn (or acid indigestion), a burning sensation in the center of the chest. Symptoms may also include nausea, gagging, cough, or hoarseness. Gastroesophageal reflux disease is characterized by symptoms of acid reflux 2 or more times a week.

TIPS FOR CONTROLLING ACID REFLUX

- Avoid foods and beverages that affect the lower esophageal sphincter or that irritate the esophagus, such as fatty and fried foods, peppermint, chocolate, alcohol, coffee, citrus fruits, and tomatoes
- Decrease the size of portions at mealtime
- Lose weight, if you are overweight
- Stop smoking or using tobacco products
- Avoid lying down for 2 to 3 hours after eating
- Elevate your head when sleeping or resting
- Take an antacid

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECEIVING TREATMENT

Without treatment, gastroesophageal reflux disease can result in damage to the lining of the esophagus, including inflammation, ulcers, bleeding, and scarring. This damage can also lead to a precancerous condition known as Barrett esophagus.

Consult your doctor if you think you may have gastroesophageal reflux disease.


Brian Pace, MA, Writer
Cassio Lynm, MA, Illustrator
Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor