

What is heartburn?

Heartburn (or reflux or oesophageal reflux) is very common. Almost everyone has it at some time. It is a feeling of discomfort or burning or even pain felt rising up from the lower chest into the neck. Some people call it indigestion. Heartburn is due to stomach acid rising up into the oesophagus, where it can cause pain and inflammation. Occasionally heartburn is associated with food or fluid coming to the mouth. This is called regurgitation. If heartburn occurs regularly, say, a few days a week or even every day, it can be distressing and need treatment.

Does my diet cause heartburn?

Many people who have reflux have symptoms no matter what they eat. Sometimes, however, the foods we eat can make heartburn worse. Foods which can make heartburn worse include fatty foods, chocolate, coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, cola drinks and peppermint. Some people know that a particular food, for instance, cucumber, garlic or capsicum, can give them heartburn. You should avoid foods or situations that you know can cause you trouble. For example, don't have a fatty meal just before going to bed or drink a lot of coffee at the end of the day. Some people benefit from losing weight if they are overweight.

Do I need any tests?

Usually tests are not necessary. Heartburn is common and doctors know a lot about the cause and how to treat it. However, if the medication your doctor suggests doesn't help or if you have a feeling that food gets stuck in your oesophagus or if you have pain when you swallow or if you have vomited or lost weight, your doctor may suggest you have a test called an endoscopy. During an endoscopy, which is done



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while you are under sedation, doctors can inspect the inside of your oesophagus using a flexible tube. They may then suggest a change in your treatment.

Rarely, further tests are needed to check the muscles in the oesophagus or the amount of time that acid refluxes up out of the stomach.

How is reflux treated?

The treatment depends on how severe your symptoms are. People who have mild symptoms may respond to antacids which neutralise the acid produced by the stomach. Other people may require drugs that reduce the amount of acid the stomach produces. You can buy some of these medications over the counter on the advice of your pharmacist. To get some others you need a prescription from your doctor. Treatment is very effective and safe.

Will I need to take medicine forever?

Unfortunately, most people who have reflux symptoms continue to have trouble if they don't take medicine. However, you may not need to take your medicine every day. You can experiment to see what suits you.

DIGESTIVE HEALTH FOUNDATION

The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is an educational body committed to promoting better health for all Australians by promoting education and community health programs related to the digestive system.

The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia, the professional body representing the Specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease in Australia. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in GI disorders.

Since its establishment in 1990 the DHF has been involved in the development of programs to improve community awareness and the understanding of digestive diseases.

Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.

Guidelines for General Practitioners and patient leaflets are available on a range of topics related to GI disorders. Copies are available by contacting the Secretariat at the address below.

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Further copies of patient information leaflets on a range of digestive disorders are available from the Digestive Health Foundation, 145 Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000. Telephone (02) 9256 5455, Fax (02) 9241 4586. Website <http://www.gesa.org.au>

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HEARTBURN (ESOPHAGEAL REFLUX)



HEARTBURN

Second Edition 2002



An information leaflet for patients and interested members of the general public prepared by the Digestive Health Foundation