

# Heartburn

## *The Health Column*

Dec  
2015

Most of us at some in our lives will experience heartburn – after a big meal, undertaking strenuous activity too soon after eating, and drinking too much.

So heartburn (gastro-oesophageal reflux or indigestion) is really very common.

Heartburn is caused by the contents of the stomach coming back up into the oesophagus where it can cause a burning sensation in the chest or throat.

Persistent reflux that occurs more than twice a week is considered to be gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD), and it can eventually lead to more serious health problems. People of all ages can have GORD.

Occasional heartburn on the other hand is what we can get from eating too much, from anxiety, and advanced pregnancy – to name but a few of the causes.

Heartburn is also one of the symptoms of peptic ulcer, but more usually it is GORD. Remember that GORD is a chronic illness, like asthma or high blood pressure, and like those diseases, ongoing treatment is usually necessary.

Reflux occurs when what goes down the oesophagus – that is the ‘food pipe’ to the stomach – comes back up again to where it’s not meant to be. And it comes back up again mixed with stomach acid and other chemicals. So it’s not surprising that the regurgitation or backwash of swallowed food causes a burning feeling. It’s generally described by reflux sufferers as beginning in the stomach or lower chest and moving upwards behind the breastbone towards the neck or throat.

Three types of medicine are available in Australia to treat symptoms of heartburn and reflux. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist about the best medicine for your symptoms, particularly if you take any medicines for any other conditions.

If you only suffer from the occasional episode of heartburn, or your symptoms are mild, over-the-counter (OTC) antacids available at your pharmacy may bring relief and these medicines are available as tablets or liquids. Antacids relieve heartburn by acting to neutralise stomach acid. They should be taken when symptoms occur. It’s always a good idea to talk to your doctor about any medicines you are taking regularly, in case they have an effect on other illness you have or



prescription medicines you may be taking. If you still experience heartburn or other reflux symptoms even though you take antacids, talk to your doctor, and be sure to mention that you are not getting relief with antacids.

If you suffer occasional symptoms you may also benefit from an H2-antagonist. Some of these medicines are available without a prescription. These medicines partially inhibit the secretion of acid in the stomach by blocking the histamine receptors. Because less acid is being produced, you experience fewer symptoms during reflux. These drugs are less effective at acid suppression than the proton pump inhibitors (see below). If you are not getting relief from an H2-antagonist even though you are taking it regularly, you should mention it to your doctor at your next visit.

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) are a type of drug that reduces stomach acid by blocking the acid-secreting cells. They produce more effective acid suppression than the H2-antagonists, relieving symptoms and allowing inflammation on the oesophagus to heal. Some proton pump inhibitors can be purchased from a pharmacy for short-term use, but most are only available on prescription.

No herbal remedies or supplements have been proven to effectively relieve the symptoms of heartburn, although many, such as ginger or apple cider vinegar, have been used for centuries. If you are planning on taking any of these, check with your doctor or pharmacist first, as they may interfere with other medicines you are taking, or affect other aspects of your health.

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. You can get more detailed information on heartburn Self Care Fact Card *Heartburn and indigestion* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.