

Heartburn

The Health Column

07 Dec
2016

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

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 can be caused by eating too much, from anxiety, and advanced pregnancy – to name but a few of the causes.

Certain medicines may precipitate heartburn, and obesity or smoking may also lead to symptoms. Treatment of heartburn can include lifestyle changes as well as the use of medicines.

Simple changes to diet and lifestyle may assist in preventing or reducing heartburn. Keeping to a healthy weight, giving up smoking, and avoiding foods that aggravate or cause symptoms may help reduce heartburn. Talk to your pharmacist or doctor about other strategies that can assist with managing GORD.

There are a number of medicines 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. These medicines are available as tablets or liquids. Antacids relieve heartburn by acting to neutralise stomach acid. They should be taken when symptoms occur. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about how to best take these. Antacids can interact with some medicines, and there are some people who should not take certain antacids. Your doctor or pharmacist can advise on the best treatment for different people. It is important to discuss with your doctor or pharmacist any medicines that you are taking

– including those available without a prescription. If symptoms of heartburn or reflux persist or occur frequently it is important to discuss this with your doctor.

If you suffer occasional symptoms you may also benefit from an H₂-antagonist. Some of these medicines are available without a prescription. These medicines reduce the amount of acid produced in the stomach. 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). Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for more information about these medicines.

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) are a type of medicine that reduces stomach acid by blocking the acid-secreting cells. They produce more effective acid suppression than other medicines for heartburn and reflux, although they may work more slowly. By reducing the amount of stomach acid produced, this can help relieve symptoms of heartburn and reflux, and allow inflammation of 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. Your doctor or pharmacist can provide further information about these medicines.

No herbal remedies or supplements have been proven to effectively relieve the symptoms of heartburn, although traditional treatments are available. If you are interested in 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 from the 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/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.