



## P A T I E N T T O O L

# GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE (GERD)

### WHAT IS GERD?

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is a condition where acid from the stomach rises up the throat, sometimes reaching the mouth or lungs. This can result in heartburn (acid indigestion), dry cough, asthma symptoms, or trouble swallowing. Persistent reflux that occurs more than twice a week is considered GERD, and it can eventually lead to more serious health problems.

One cause of GERD is a relaxing of the muscle that controls entry to the stomach. Sometimes the stomach moves slightly upward through the diaphragm (hiatal hernia), which can also allow acid leakage. Other factors that may contribute to GERD include obesity; pregnancy; smoking; and some foods, including citrus fruits, chocolate, drinks with caffeine or alcohol, fatty foods, garlic and onions, mint flavoring, spicy foods, and tomatoes.

### HOW IS GERD DIAGNOSED?

Initial diagnosis will be made on the basis of symptoms. If your symptoms don't get better, your provider may want to do additional tests.

- **Barium swallow** uses x rays to find structural sources of your GERD
- **Endoscopy** is a visual examination of your throat with a thin tube inserted through your mouth
- **pH monitoring** measures the acidity of your throat and can detect whether stomach acid rises up. This test is usually done for 24 hours. The procedure is sometimes useful for linking coughing to acid reflux

### HOW IS GERD TREATED?

Treatment options are determined by the length and severity of your disease and may require lifestyle changes, medications, or surgery.

### LIFESTYLE CHANGES

- Stop smoking
- Avoid foods and beverages that worsen symptoms
- Lose weight if needed
- Eat small, frequent meals
- Wear loose-fitting clothes
- Avoid lying down for 3 hours after a meal
- Raise the head of your bed 6 to 8 inches with wood blocks under the feet (extra pillows may not help)

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## MEDICATIONS

Your health care provider may recommend over-the-counter antacids or medications that stop acid production or help the muscles that empty your stomach.

- Antacids, such as Alka-Seltzer, Maalox, Mylanta, Rolaids, and Riopan, are usually the first drugs recommended
- H2 blockers decrease acid production. These drugs provide short-term relief and are effective for about half of those who have GERD symptoms
- Proton pump inhibitors are more effective than H2 blockers and can relieve symptoms and heal the esophageal lining in almost everyone who has GERD

## SURGERY

Surgery is an option when medication and lifestyle changes do not help to manage GERD symptoms. An operation called fundoplication is the standard surgical treatment for GERD. This procedure helps the stomach maintain its position below the diaphragm, and can help with acid reflux as well as a hiatal hernia. It may be performed with a laparoscope, an instrument that is inserted through tiny incisions in the abdomen. This minimizes scarring and healing time.

## NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH: POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Frequent heartburn, also called acid indigestion, is the most common symptom of GERD in adults. Anyone experiencing heartburn twice a week or more may have GERD
- You can have GERD without having heartburn. Your symptoms could include a dry cough, asthma symptoms, or trouble swallowing
- If you have been using antacids for more than 2 weeks, it is time to see your health care provider. Most doctors can treat GERD. Your health care provider may refer you to a gastroenterologist, a doctor who treats diseases of the stomach and intestines
- Health care providers usually recommend lifestyle and dietary changes to relieve symptoms of GERD. Many people with GERD also need medication. Surgery may be considered as a treatment option

## RESOURCES

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National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse. <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/gerd/>

AcidRefluxConnection.com. <http://www.healthcentral.com/acid-reflux/?ic=1102>

American College of Gastroenterology (ACG). <http://www.acg.gi.org/>