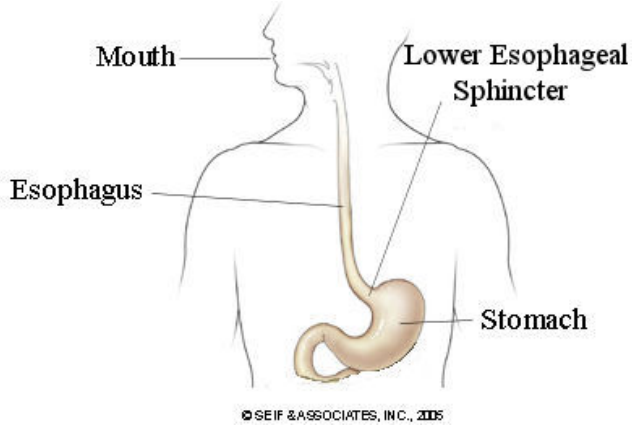
Heartburn

Heartburn is a painful, burning sensation in the chest. It may feel worse in certain positions, such as lying down or bending over. It is caused by stomach acid backing up into the tube that carries food from the mouth down to the stomach (*lower esophagus*).



CAUSES

A number of conditions can cause or worsen heartburn, including:

- Pregnancy.
- Being overweight (*obesity*).
- A condition called hiatal hernia, in which part or all of the stomach is moved up into the chest through a weakness in the diaphragm muscle.
- Alcohol.
- Exercise.
- Eating just before going to bed.
- Overeating.
- Medications, including:
  - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen and naproxen.
  - Aspirin.
  - Some blood pressure medicines, including beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers, and alpha-blockers.
  - Nitrates (used to treat angina).
  - The asthma medication Theophylline.
  - Certain sedative drugs.
- Heartburn may be worse after eating certain foods. These heartburn-causing foods are different for different people, but may include:
  - Peppers.
  - Chocolate.
  - Coffee.
  - High-fat foods, including fried foods.
  - Spicy foods.
  - Garlic, onions.
  - Citrus fruits, including oranges, grapefruit, lemons and limes.
  - Food containing tomatoes or tomato products.
  - Mint.
  - Carbonated beverages.
  - Vinegar.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms may last for a few minutes or a few hours, and can include:

- Burning pain in the chest or lower throat.
- Bitter taste in the mouth.
- Coughing.

DIAGNOSIS

If the usual treatments for heartburn do not improve your symptoms, then tests may be done to see if there is another condition present. Possible tests may include:

- X-rays.
- Endoscopy. This is when a tube with a light and a camera on the end is used to examine the esophagus and

the stomach.
- Blood, breath, or stool tests may be used to check for bacteria that cause ulcers.

TREATMENT

There are a number of non-prescription medicines used to treat heartburn, including:
- Antacids.
- Acid reducers (also called H-2 blockers).
- Proton-pump inhibitors.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Raise the head of your bed by putting blocks under the legs.
- Eat 2-3 hours before going to bed.
- Stop smoking.
- Try to reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- **Do not** eat just a few very large meals. Instead, eat many smaller meals throughout the day.
- Try to identify foods and beverages that make your symptoms worse, and avoid these.
- Avoid tight clothing.
- **Do not** exercise right after eating.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF YOU:

- Have severe chest pain that goes down your arm, or into your jaw or neck.
- Feel sweaty, dizzy, or lightheaded.
- Are short of breath.
- Throw up (*vomit*) blood.
- Have difficulty or pain with swallowing.
- Have bloody or black, tarry stools.
- Have bouts of heartburn more than three times a week for more than two weeks.

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