

Patient information

Acid reflux and oesophagitis

Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD)

Acid reflux is when acid from the stomach leaks up into the gullet (oesophagus). This may cause heartburn and other symptoms. A medicine which prevents your stomach from making acid is a common treatment and usually works well. Some people take short courses of treatment when symptoms flare up. Some people need long term daily treatment to keep symptoms away.

Understanding the oesophagus and stomach

When we eat, food passes down the oesophagus (gullet) into the stomach. Cells in the lining of the stomach make acid and other chemicals that help to digest food. Stomach cells also make mucus that protects them from damage from the acid. The cells lining the oesophagus are different and have little protection from acid.

There is a circular bank of muscle (a 'sphincter') at the junction between the oesophagus and stomach. This relaxes to allow food down but then normally tightens up and stops food and acid leaking back up (refluxing) into the oesophagus. In effect the sphincter acts like a valve.

What are reflux and oesophagitis?

Acid reflux is when some acid leaks up (refluxes) into the oesophagus.

Oesophagitis means inflammation of the lining of the oesophagus. Most cases of oesophagitis are due to reflux of stomach acid which irritates the inside lining of the oesophagus.

The lining of the oesophagus can cope with a certain amount of acid. However, it is more sensitive to acid in some people. Therefore, some people develop symptoms

with only a small amount of reflux. However some people have a lot reflux without developing oesophagitis.

Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD)

This is a general term that describes the range of situations – acid reflux with or without oesophagitis and symptoms.

What are the symptoms of acid reflux and oesophagitis?

Heartburn is the main symptom. It is a burning feeling that rises from the upper abdomen or lower chest up towards the neck (it is confusing as it has nothing to do with the heart!).

Other common symptoms include: pain in the upper abdomen and chest, feeling sick, an acid taste in the mouth, bloating belching, and a burning pain when you swallow hot drinks. Like heartburn, these symptoms tend to come and go, and tend to be worse after a meal.

Some uncommon symptoms may occur. This makes the diagnosis difficult in some cases as the symptoms can mimic other conditions. For example:

- A persistent cough, particularly at night. This is due to the refluxed acid irritating the windpipe. Hoarseness or asthma symptoms can sometimes be due to acid reflux.
- Severe chest pain develops in some cases (and may be mistaken for a heart attack)

What causes acid reflux and who does it affect?

The sphincter at the bottom of the oesophagus normally prevents acid reflux. Problems occur if the sphincter does not work very well. This is common, but in most cases it is not known why it does not work so well. In some cases the pressure in the stomach rises higher than the sphincter can withstand, for example during pregnancy, after a large meal or when bending forward. If you have a hiatus hernia (when part of the stomach protrudes into the chest through the diaphragm), you are quite likely to develop reflux.

Most people have heartburn at some time, perhaps after a large meal. However, about one in three adults have some heartburn every few days and nearly one in 10

adults has heartburn at least once a day. In many cases it is mild and soon passes. However, it is quite common for symptoms to be frequent or severe enough to affect quality of life. Regular heartburn is more common in smokers, pregnant women, heavy drinkers, the overweight and those aged between 35 and 64.

What tests might be done?

Tests are not usually necessary if you have typical symptoms. Many people are diagnosed with 'presumed acid reflux' when they have typical symptoms and are eased by treatment. Tests may be advised if symptoms are severe, or do not improve with treatment, or are not typical of GORD.

- Endoscopy is the common test. This is where a thin, flexible telescope is passed down the oesophagus into the stomach. This allows a doctor or nurse to look inside. With oesophagitis, the lower part of the oesophagus looks red and inflamed. However, if it looks normal it does not rule out acid reflux. Some people are very sensitive to small amounts of acid, and can have symptoms with little or no inflammation to see.
- A test to check the acidity inside the oesophagus may be done if the diagnosis is not clear.
- Other tests such as heart tracings, chest x-rays etc may be done to rule out other conditions if the symptoms are typical.

What can I do to help with symptoms?

The following are commonly advised. However, there has been little research to prove how well these 'lifestyle' changes help to ease reflux.

- **Smoking:** The chemicals from cigarettes relax the sphincter muscle and make acid reflux more likely. Symptoms may ease if you are a smoker and stop smoking.
- **Some food and drinks** may make reflux worse in some people (it is thought that some foods may relax the sphincter and allow more acid to reflux). It is difficult to be certain how much food contributes. Let common sense be your guide. If it seems that a food is causing symptoms, then try avoiding it for a while to see if symptoms improve. Foods and drinks that have been suspected of making symptoms worse in some people include: peppermint, tomatoes, chocolate, spicy foods, hot drinks, coffee and alcoholic drinks.

- **Some medicines** may make symptoms worse. They may irritate the oesophagus, or relax the sphincter muscle and make acid reflux more likely. The most common culprits are anti-inflammatory painkillers (such as ibuprofen or aspirin). Others include: diazepam, theophylline, nitrates and calcium channel blockers such as nifedipine. Tell a doctor if you suspect that a prescribed medicine is making symptoms worse.
- **Weight:** If you are overweight it puts extra pressure on the stomach and encourages acid reflux. Losing some weight may ease the symptoms.
- **Posture:** Lying down or bending forward a lot during the day encourages reflux. Sitting hunched or wearing tight belts may put extra pressure on the stomach that may make any reflux worse.
- **Bedtime:** If symptoms recur most nights, it may help to go to bed with an empty dry stomach. To do this, don't eat in the last three hours before bedtime, and don't drink in the last two hours before bedtime. If you raise the head of the bed by 10-15 cms (with books under the bed's legs), this will help gravity to keep acid from refluxing the oesophagus.

What are the treatments for acid reflux and oesophagitis?

Antacids: These are alkali liquids or tablets that neutralise the acid. A dose usually gives quick relief. There are many brands that you can buy. You can also get some on prescription. You can use antacids as required for mild or infrequent bouts of heartburn.

Acid-suppressing medicines: Two groups of medicines are used – proton pump inhibitors (PPI's) and histamine receptor blockers (H2 antagonists). They work in different ways but both reduce (suppress) the amount of acid that the stomach makes. PPI's include omeprazole, lansoprazole, pantoprazole, rebeprazole and esomeprazole. H2 antagonists include cimetidine, famotidine, nizatidin and ranitidine. You can buy some low dose brand at pharmacies. You can use these low dose brands as required or take short courses when you get short bouts of heartburn.

If you get symptoms frequently then see a doctor. You may be advised to take a daily dose of an acid-suppressing medicine to prevent symptoms from occurring. The dose that a doctor prescribes is usually higher than the dose you can buy. The treatment plan with acid-suppressing medicines can vary from person to person.

- You may be advised to take a full dose course for a month or so. This often settles symptoms down and allows any inflammation in the oesophagus to clear. After this, all that you may need is to go back to antacids as required.

- Some people need a course of treatment every now and then when symptoms flare up
- Some people need long-term daily acid suppressing treatment. Without medication, their symptoms return quickly. Long term treatment is thought to be safe, and side effects are uncommon. The aim is to take a full dose course for a month or so to settle symptoms. After this, it is common to 'step-down' the dose to the lowest dose that prevents symptoms. However, the maximum full dose taken each day is needed in some cases.

Prokinetic medicines

These are medicines that speed up the passage of food through the stomach. They include domperidone and metoclopramide. They are not commonly used but help in some cases, particularly if you have marked bloating or belching symptoms.

Surgery

This is an option if medicines fail to prevent symptoms, or if you need medication every day to control symptoms. An operation can tighten the lower oesophagus to prevent acid leaking up from the stomach. It can be done by 'keyhole' surgery and has a good success rate.

Are there any complications from oesophagitis?

- **Stricture:** If you have severe and long-standing inflammation it can cause scarring and narrowing (a stricture) of the lower oesophagus. This is uncommon.
- **Barrett's oesophagus:** In this condition the cells that line the lower oesophagus become changed. The changed cells are more prone than usual to becoming cancerous (about one or two people in 100 with Barrett's oesophagus develop cancer of the oesophagus).
- **Cancer:** Your risk of developing cancer of the oesophagus is slightly increased compared to the normal risk if you have long-term acid reflux.

It has to be stressed that most people with reflux do not develop any of these complications. Tell your doctor if you have pain or difficulty (food sticking) when you swallow which may be the first symptom of a complication.

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