

Treating Acid Reflux Without Medication

Discover 4 things that spell relief

If you suffer with frequent heartburn or acid indigestion, you may be one of millions of Americans with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Antacids and prescription acid blockers can help soothe symptoms, but long-term use can cause other health problems, according to Tanya Edwards, MD, of the Center for Integrative Medicine.

Your body needs stomach acid because:

Acid begins digesting food in your stomach. "If stomach acid doesn't do its function, larger material can get into the small intestine and make digestion there more difficult," says Dr. Edwards.

Acid helps sterilize the food you eat. Otherwise, "bad" bacteria and yeast on food can quickly overwhelm the "good" bacteria in your gut. That can lead to things like irritable bowel and leaky gut syndrome.

Certain nutrients, like calcium and B12, require acid for absorption. "People on long-term acid blockers have a higher incidence of bone fractures and B12 deficiency, which has been linked to anemia, neurological problems and depression," says Dr. Edwards.

The real cause of GERD

For people with GERD, stomach acid isn't the real problem. So taking acid-blocking drugs isn't the real solution.

The problem is that the muscle (called the lower esophageal sphincter) between your esophagus and stomach doesn't close adequately. This allows stomach acid to back up into the esophagus. It could be because the muscle is weak. Or it could be because there's too much pressure on the muscle — due to extra weight around your middle or a buildup of food in your stomach.

Four ways to find relief without drugs

Dr. Edwards recommends alternative treatments, in this order:

- 1 Cut out high-fat foods, smoking, caffeine and peppermint. These things relax the lower esophageal sphincter. Peppermint's calming and numbing effect may be good for indigestion, nausea and other stomach ailments. But it's not good for GERD, when you need to tighten your lower esophageal muscle.
- 2 Work on losing weight, if needed. Obesity causes increased abdominal pressure that can push whatever is in your stomach up toward your esophagus. Reducing this pressure is an important long-term goal.
- 3 Speed up digestion with enzymes. "After age 40, your pancreas produces less enzymes that help digestion in your small intestine," says Dr. Edwards. "That slows down your entire digestive process, which can mean your stomach doesn't empty as quickly." Digestive enzymes, available at any health food store, can keep things moving.
- 4 Counter bad bacteria with probiotics. Some studies have linked GERD to certain bacteria in the stomach and esophagus. Getting a dose of "good" bacteria in probiotics can help offset these "bad" bacteria. "Usually, I'll recommend a combination of probiotics and digestive enzymes," says Dr. Edwards. "This alone has taken care of GERD symptoms in 75 percent of my patients and has allowed them to begin weaning off of acid-blocking drugs."

For some patients, GERD is caused by food intolerance. Cutting out wheat, dairy, nuts or eggs may resolve it. Acupuncture also can be effective, adds Dr. Edwards.

"In integrative medicine, our goal is to treat the underlying problem," she notes. "These treatments address the root cause of GERD instead of masking its symptoms with medications that may cause future complications." To talk to one of our physicians about alternative treatments for acid reflux or GERD, call the Center for Integrative Medicine at 216.986.HEAL (4325).