

## Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

When the contents of your stomach – food, stomach acid, enzymes, and bile – come up into your esophagus instead of going down into the intestines, you’ve got acid reflux, commonly called heartburn. While your stomach can handle these harsh substances, your esophagus can be irritated, and over time, damaged by this acidity.

That’s of special concern to patients who are being treated for cancer and those who have recently finished treatment. Traditional chemotherapy agents attack cells that grow and reproduce quickly, which most cancer cells do. Unfortunately, the cells that line the digestive tract also reproduce quickly. As a result, those healthy cells are often affected by chemo — and that’s why acid reflux, nausea, and diarrhea are common chemo side effects. Radiation to the head, neck, or chest can also cause damage to the esophagus that can cause acid reflux for a few weeks or longer after treatment ends.

### Symptoms

- heartburn (burning feeling)
- regurgitation (sour-tasting acids backing up into your mouth)
- burping, hiccups
- nausea, bloating,
- sore throat, hoarse voice
- dry cough, wheezing

**Mouth and throat sores may also create a burning feeling. Check with your doctor to find the cause of your symptoms.**

### What to Avoid

- Acidic foods: tomatoes, citrus (oranges, lemons, etc.), garlic, onions, chocolate, mint, spicy foods, mustard, smoked/cured meats, and alcoholic beverages
- Caffeine: coffee, tea, soda, energy drinks
- Diets high in dairy and red meat
- Smoking
- Wearing tight belt or clothes

## What You Can Do

- ✓ Eat smaller meals, more frequently. A big meal can increase the pressure against the muscle sphincter between your stomach and esophagus.
- ✓ If you are overweight, losing weight may reduce symptoms.
- ✓ Stay upright for at least a half hour after eating; avoid bending over, exercising, or lying down during this time.
- ✓ Elevate your shoulders and head 5-8 inches by putting bricks or books under the legs at the head of your bed. (Using pillows to prop yourself up may cause neck or back pain.)
- ✓ Try napping sitting up in a chair.
- ✓ Keep a journal of what seems to trigger symptoms, and avoid your triggers.

Talk to your doctor before stopping or starting any medicines or supplements; some can cause or worsen acid reflux. Ask what medication would be recommended for your reflux.

## Medications for Acid Reflux

- Antacids neutralize stomach acid. There are a few kinds. Check labels about when and how to take these medications, particularly in relation to eating and drinking.
  - Sodium bicarbonate (Alka-Seltzer®) may not be suitable for those with high blood pressure.
  - Calcium carbonate (Tums®) may cause constipation.
  - Aluminum-based (Amphojel®) may also cause constipation.
  - Magnesium-based (Milk of Magnesia®) may cause diarrhea.
  - Aluminum-magnesium combinations (Maalox®, Mylanta®) have less risk of diarrhea or constipation.
  - Foaming agents (Gaviscon®) help keep stomach contents from entering the esophagus.
- Acid reducers include H2 blockers (famotidine, ranitidine) and proton pump inhibitors (omeprazole, lansoprazole). They decrease the amount of acid your stomach produces. Check labels about when and how to take these medications, particularly in relation to eating and drinking.
- Prokinetics (metoclopramide, urecholine) strengthen the sphincter muscle between the stomach and the esophagus and help empty your stomach faster. Drink a full glass of water when taking these medicines.