

HEARTBURN

INTRODUCTION

Heartburn or Gastro-Oesophageal Reflux Disease (GORD) is caused when the acidic contents of the stomach return back through the valve at the top of the stomach to the oesophagus. This irritates and damages the delicate lining of the oesophagus. Acid reflux happens when the sphincter, the valve between the oesophagus and stomach does not work very well and acid leaks upwards. This can lead to inflammation of the oesophagus causing soreness and swelling.

SYMPTOMS

The main symptom of GORD is heartburn. Heartburn is a form of indigestion and has nothing to do with the heart. It is usually felt as a burning pain behind your breastbone. Heartburn often happens after a meal when your stomach is full, or when you lie down, which allows acid to flow upwards more easily. Heartburn is more common if you are a smoker, overweight or pregnant.

Other symptoms of GORD can include:

- An acidic, sour taste in your mouth.
- Burning pain in your throat.
- Bloating and belching.
- Stomach pains.
- Burning pain in your throat and oesophagus when you swallow hot drinks.
- Regurgitating nausea and vomiting.
- Vomiting blood.

Symptoms tend to get worse after eating, especially after a large fatty meal. It is important to distinguish heartburn from angina, which is another cause of chest pain. Angina pain is usually brought on by exertion such as climbing a stairs and is relieved quickly by rest so it is generally not difficult to distinguish it from heartburn. If you have any doubts you should consult your doctor.

CAUSES

There are two main causes of GORD.

1. POOR SPHINCTER CONTROL

Having a **Hiatus Hernia** can also cause poor sphincter control. In this type of hernia, part of the stomach pokes through your diaphragm. The muscles in your diaphragm are then stretched and don't allow the sphincter to close, so acid can escape. **Smoking** relaxes the sphincter muscles, so makes acid reflux more likely. **Particular foods**, such

as fatty foods, chocolate, or oranges, relax the sphincter, while others such as coffee and tomatoes directly irritate the oesophagus. **Medicines** can make GORD worse by relaxing the sphincter, for example, diazepam. Other drugs such as alendronates used for osteoporosis can directly irritate the oesophagus.

2. PRESSURE ON THE STOMACH

Acid reflux can also happen when there is a lot of pressure on your stomach forcing the stomach contents out and back up into the oesophagus. This might happen after a very large meal, during pregnancy, if you are constipated, or when you wear tight-waisted clothes or bend forward.

TREATMENT

There are some non-prescription medicines you can take to help the symptoms of GORD. These include:

- **H2 receptor antagonists**, for example, Ranitidine work by reducing the amount of acid produced in the stomach. A very cost effective generic version available over the counter in Whelehans is Ranitic[®] (Same as Zantac[®]). These are considered the fastest and most effective heartburn treatment available over the counter in pharmacies.
- **Motility stimulants** for example, domperidone. These medicines increase the rate at which your stomach empties so reduce pressure on sphincter. A very cost effective generic version available over the counter in Whelehans is Domerid[®].
- **Alginates** such as Gaviscon[®] form a layer that floats on top of your stomach contents. This stops the reflux of stomach acid and protects your oesophagus lining.
- **Antacids** such as Magnesium Trisilicate and Aluminium Hydroxide neutralise the acid in your stomach. (eg) Rennies[®]

If these do not work, prescription only medication may be needed from GP:

- **Proton Pump Inhibitors**, for example, Lansoprazole and Omeprazole.

Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs) available only on prescription which reduce the amount of acid produced by your stomach, and are usually the first choice for GORD. PPIs work quickly and effectively. A one month course is normally enough to clear up your symptoms. Symptoms often come back within a year and can be treated with further courses of PPI. Alternatively, a low dose of the PPI may be needed all the time to control the symptoms. PPIs are quite expensive but in many cases there are less expensive but equally effective generic versions available. If you are prescribed a heartburn treatment, you can check with your pharmacist if there is a cheaper one available.

You should check with your GP if you suffer from indigestion when you are over 45; if an indigestion remedy is not effective after continual use or if you have unexplained weight loss in association with indigestion.

PREVENTION

There are some lifestyle changes you can make to help prevent and reduce heartburn. These include:

- Stop smoking, as smoking can make GORD worse.
- Avoiding foods that you find bring on heartburn.
- Eating small, regular meals.
- Speaking to GP about changing your medication if you think it could be causing symptoms.
- Losing weight if overweight as this reduces pressure on your stomach.
- Avoid wearing tight belts and waistbands, and try not to leaning forward a lot during the day.
- If you have symptoms at night, try not eating three hours before bed, and not drinking two hours before.
- Using an extra pillow at night reduces acid moving up to oesophagus.

SURGERY

If medicines do not help to control the symptoms of GORD, surgery may be considered. The aim of surgery is to make it harder for stomach contents to re-enter your oesophagus so that there is less reflux.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591. You can also e-mail queries to info@whelehans.ie.