

INDIGESTION

INTRODUCTION

Indigestion or dyspepsia is a discomfort or pain in the abdomen caused by factors such as excess acid in the stomach, certain medications or overindulgence with food or alcohol.

Indigestion is very common and most people have it from time to time. But sometimes it can be so painful it feels as if you are having a heart attack.

SYMPTOMS

- Pain on chest or top of abdomen, usually soon after eating.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nausea and vomiting, or
- Flatulence, burping or belching.

CAUSES

In most cases, there is no underlying medical reason that causes indigestion. It is usually due to a large amount of pressure on the stomach, such as after a big meal, or because the sphincter (valve between stomach and oesophagus) isn't working very well.

Triggers include:

- Eating a particularly large, spicy or fatty meal.
- Eating certain foods such as chocolate or oranges which relax the sphincter.
- Eating foods that directly irritate the lining of oesophagus (e.g.) coffee, tomatoes.
- Smoking, this relaxes the sphincter and makes acid reflux more likely.
- Leaving a lot of time between eating meals. When you eat, food temporarily neutralises the acid (makes it less acidic). Acidity levels build up after eating.
- Pregnancy - the space needed by the developing baby pushes the stomach upwards towards the oesophagus.

Other causes of indigestion include:

1. *Duodenal and stomach (gastric) ulcers:*

Peptic ulcers develop when the lining of your stomach or duodenum is damaged, exposing the sensitive tissue underneath. The acidic juices produced by your body to break down food irritate the sensitive tissue, causing pain and discomfort.

2. *Duodenitis:*

Inflammation of the duodenum - this sometimes happens before an ulcer forms.

3. ***Gastritis:***

Inflammation of your stomach - it sometimes happens before an ulcer forms.

4. ***Hiatus hernia:***

In this type of hernia; part of the stomach pokes through your diaphragm, the main breathing muscle under your lungs. The muscles in the diaphragm are then stretched and don't allow the sphincter to close, so acid can escape from the stomach back up into your oesophagus.

5. ***Medication:***

Some medicines can cause indigestion as a side effect. This often happens with anti-inflammatory medicines, such as Ibuprofen, Diclofenac and Naproxen. They can irritate the lining of your stomach, leading to inflammation and ulcers.

Other types of medicines that can cause indigestion include some antibiotics, such as Erythromycin, Metronidazole, and corticosteroids such as Prednisolone.

6. ***Helicobacter pylori:***

Helicobacter pylori (commonly called H. pylori) is a type of bacteria that can infect the lining of the stomach and duodenum. It's a very common infection and affects more than a quarter of the population, although most people don't have symptoms and aren't aware they have it. H. pylori can be a cause of duodenal and stomach ulcers.

7. ***Stomach or oesophageal cancer:***

Rarely, indigestion can be a symptom of stomach or oesophageal cancer.

WARNING SYMPTOMS

Sometimes indigestion can be caused by a serious, underlying medical condition. It is important to see your GP in the following cases:

- You lose weight for no obvious reason and without deliberately trying to.
- You start developing indigestion problems over the age of 45, having not had symptoms before.
- Indigestion is accompanied by severe pain.
- Vomiting fresh red blood.
- Vomiting blood that looks like coffee grounds.

- Feel generally unwell.
- Have difficulty swallowing.
- Develop anaemia (low in iron), which can cause tiredness, dizziness and shortness of breath, which could be due to abdominal bleeding.
- Have an abnormality such as a lump in the abdomen.

TREATMENT

Treatment depends on what is causing your indigestion. For most mild cases of indigestion, making simple changes to your diet and lifestyle can help:

- Eat small, regular meals.
- Reduce the amount of fat in your diet.
- Avoid foods that you know trigger symptoms, such as spicy or rich foods.
- Cut down on the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Stop smoking.
- Managing stress better
- Sleeping slightly propped up on two pillows can also help.

NON-PRESCRIPTION MEDICINES

You can buy a range of non-prescription medicines from your pharmacy to help relieve mild indigestion, including:

- **H2 receptor antagonists**, for example, Ranitidine. H2 receptor antagonists also reduce the amount of acid produced by your stomach.
- **Motility stimulants**, for example, Domperidone. These medicines increase the rate at which your stomach empties so reduce pressure on sphincter.
- **Alginates** forms 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.

If these do not work, *prescription only medication* may be needed from GP (e.g.) proton pump inhibitor such as Omeprazole.

PREVENTION

Tips include:

- Eat small, regular meals, rather than going for long periods of time without eating and then having a large meal. Food helps to neutralise stomach acid. Acid builds up if the stomach is empty for a long time.
- Chew your food slowly this helps to start the body's digestive process.
- Avoid eating very rich, spicy and fatty foods.
- Cutting down on caffeine (found in tea, coffee and cola) can also help.
- Stop smoking,
- Lose weight if overweight as this reduces pressure upwards on sphincter.
- Reduce alcohol consumption as it makes indigestion worse.
- Your posture is important when your body is trying to digest food. Sitting hunched forward in your seat, wearing tight belts or waistbands and lying down soon after a meal, puts more pressure on the stomach and can trigger indigestion.
- If you get indigestion symptoms at night, try to avoid eating or drinking anything for about three hours before you go to bed.
- Use an extra pillow to prop your head and shoulders up and discourage stomach acid from moving up into the oesophagus.