



# Nutrition Nuggets



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## Acid Reflux or Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

Almost everyone experiences a little acid reflux occasionally, particularly after a heavy meal. Up to 36 percent of otherwise healthy Americans experience heartburn, also called acid indigestion, at least once a month.

After a meal, the valve between the esophagus and stomach usually remains closed. When it relaxes at an inappropriate time, this allows a portion of stomach contents to travel backwards into the esophagus, resulting in a burning sensation.

### Symptoms

GERD sometimes occurs without symptoms. Most frequently, at least some of the following are present:

- Persistent heartburn that is increased by bending over, lying down, or eating
- Difficulty or discomfort with swallowing
- Early satiety or feeling full quickly, belching
- Chronic cough or wheezing, asthma, sinusitis
- Hoarseness or laryngitis, throat clearing
- Nausea and vomiting

### Things That may Worsen Symptoms

When a hiatal hernia is present, reflux can occur more easily. Normally the diaphragm muscle is located above the stomach and aids in the proper functioning of the stomach/esophagus valve. With a hiatal hernia, the upper portion of the stomach has moved above the diaphragm. From this position, the diaphragm can not exert as much influence over the valve.

Obesity, pregnancy, and smoking can also contribute to GERD. Additionally, many medications, especially those that delay stomach emptying or increase stomach acid, can increase the risk of reflux.

### To Reduce Problems

Many individuals eat a highly restrictive diet due to their fear of experiencing reflux. This is harmful to overall health and can result in a worsening of the disease.

It can be helpful to keep a detailed food diary and record any incidence of symptoms and the times at which they occur. This is the best way to determine which foods and beverages are problematic.

Many things can increase acid reflux. However, there is a great deal of individual variation as to what aggravates symptoms. Caffeine, alcohol, onions, mint, and chocolate relax the esophagus/stomach valve and thereby increase risk of reflux.

Here's a list of things that may increase reflux:

- Coffee and caffeinated beverages
- Alcohol, especially beer
- Greasy, fatty, and rich foods
- Fast food and pizza
- Smoking
- Carbonated beverages

- Chocolate
- Peppermint and all mint-flavored food, drink, and gums
- Tomatoes, including all tomato products, and citrus
- Cabbage-family vegetables: cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, collards
- Large meals and drinks
- Garlic and onions
- Spicy foods

Many drink milk before bedtime, thinking this will prevent symptoms, but it actually has the opposite effect as putting anything into the stomach before laying down increases risk of reflux. Additionally, milk, alcohol, caffeinated beverages, and carbonated drinks all promote acid production, especially beer, which can double stomach acid within one hour.

## Treatment

There are many treatment strategies for GERD. They may include one or more of the following:

- **Dietary Changes**

- a) Eat small frequent meals. Don't have a large drink, but sip throughout the day.
- b) Taking small sips of aloe vera juice can soothe the acid burn after an episode of reflux. An ounce or two taken 10 minutes before each meal for up to six weeks promotes healing of inflamed tissues.
- c) Avoid cold food and drinks because they slow down digestion as they take time to come to body temperature.

- **Lifestyle Modifications**

- a) Avoid smoking.
- b) Lose excess weight, the biggest contributor to acid reflux. This reduces abdominal pressure.
- c) Wear loose-fitting clothes.
- d) Avoid lying down for at least 3 hours after meals.
- e) Raise the head of the bed six to eight inches and sleep on the left side.
- f) It may be helpful to take a short walk before going to bed. Physical activity improves overall health and facilitates good digestion.

- **Medications**

- **Surgery**

## Summary

GERD is one of the most prevalent illnesses in the United States, affecting over 15 million individuals. The incidence is increasing, mainly due to rising rates of obesity. Most individuals can become symptom-free through good dietary and lifestyle choices.

## Resources for Gastroparesis

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