

# GERD: Controlling Heartburn by Changing Your Habits

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## Overview

Symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) can be painful and, if allowed to continue, can lead to complications including esophagitis. Esophagitis is irritation or inflammation of the esophagus.

You can make changes to your lifestyle to help relieve your symptoms of GERD. Here are some things to try.

- Change your eating habits.
  - It's best to eat several small meals instead of two or three large meals.
  - After you eat, wait 2 to 3 hours before you lie down. Late-night snacks aren't a good idea.
  - Avoid foods that make your symptoms worse. These may include chocolate, mint, alcohol, pepper, spicy foods, high-fat foods, or drinks with caffeine in them, such as tea, coffee, colas, or energy drinks.
  - If your symptoms are worse after you eat a certain food, you may want to stop eating that food to see if your symptoms get better.
- Do not smoke or chew tobacco.
- Raise your bed if you have GERD symptoms at night.
  - Put the frame on blocks or place a foam wedge under the head of your mattress to raise the head of your bed 6 in. (15 cm) to 8 in. (20 cm). (Adding extra pillows does not work.)
- Avoid or reduce pressure on your stomach.
  - Don't wear tight clothing around your middle.
- Lose weight if you need to.
  - Losing just 2.5 to 4.5 kilograms (5 to 10 pounds) can help.

## How can you help relieve symptoms of GERD?

### Changing your eating habits

Developing healthier eating habits, losing weight if necessary, and avoiding foods that increase symptoms of GERD may make heartburn less likely to occur. Take your spouse or partner along with you when you go to your doctor to discuss diet habits. It will be easier to make changes in your diet if your family understands what you need to do and why.

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Here are some changes you can try.

- Avoid foods that can make your symptoms worse.  
These may include chocolate, mint, alcohol, pepper, spicy foods, high-fat foods, or drinks with caffeine in them, such as tea, coffee, colas, or energy drinks.  
If your symptoms are worse after you eat a certain food, you may want to stop eating it to see if your symptoms get better.
- Eat several small meals instead of two or three large meals.
- Don't lie down after you eat.  
After you eat, wait 2 to 3 hours before you lie down. Late-night snacks aren't a good idea.
- Lose weight if you are overweight.  
Being overweight puts more pressure on your stomach and makes you more likely to have heartburn. Losing just 2.5 to 4.5 kilograms (5 to 10 pounds) can help.

If you notice that your symptoms are worse after you eat a specific food, you may want to stop eating it and see if your symptoms get better.

## Quitting tobacco use

If you smoke or chew tobacco, stop. The nicotine from tobacco relaxes the valve between the esophagus and stomach (lower esophageal sphincter). This can allow stomach acid and juices, the chemicals that break down food in the stomach, to back up (reflux) into the esophagus, which causes heartburn.

Because the nicotine in tobacco is addicting, stopping the use of tobacco is more difficult than simply changing a habit. Those who successfully quit using tobacco usually use a combination of these strategies.

- Seek professional counselling, either by telephone or in person.
- Use medicines to help overcome the addiction to nicotine.
- Participate in a proven smoking cessation program.
- Join a support group of peers who are also quitting or who do not smoke.

## Changing your sleep habits

Here are some things you can try.

- Raise the head of your bed 15 to 20 cm (6 to 8 in.)
  - This will help keep stomach acid from flowing into your esophagus when you are sleeping.
  - You can do this by putting blocks underneath your bed frame or by placing a foam wedge under the head of your mattress. Using extra pillows will not work.
- Wait 2 to 3 hours after you eat before you lie down.
  - Lying down soon after eating will also increase the chance of getting heartburn.
  - Late-night snacks aren't a good idea.

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## Reducing pressure on your stomach

Putting pressure on your stomach may push stomach juices into your esophagus, causing heartburn. Here are some things you can try.

- Wait 2 to 3 hours after you eat before you lie down.
  - When you are lying down, the contents of your stomach can push against the valve between the esophagus and stomach (lower esophageal sphincter).
  - Sitting up allows gravity to help food and stomach juices from the esophagus drain back into your stomach.
  - Late-night snacks aren't a good idea.
- Avoid tight clothing over your stomach.
  - Tight belts, waistbands, or panty hose may push against your stomach and make your heartburn worse.
- Use care when lifting and bending.
  - Bending over tends to increase the amount of stomach acid that can get into your esophagus.
  - When lifting, bend your knees to avoid bending over at the waist.

## Credits

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