

Let's Talk...

Heartburn and Acid Reflux



What is acid reflux and what causes it?

Acid reflux occurs when the contents of your stomach, including stomach acid, travel back up into your gullet (oesophagus). When you eat or drink, food passes down your gullet and into your stomach through a protective ring of muscle called the lower oesophageal sphincter. This ring has an important job: to act as a one-way valve and close to keep things where they belong.

Reflux happens when this one-way system doesn't close fully or work as well as it should. Your stomach naturally makes powerful acid to break down food, and its lining is built to stand this. However, your gullet is much more sensitive. When acid leaks upward, it causes irritation and discomfort.

What is heartburn and what causes it?

Heartburn is a pain or burning sensation caused by acid reflux. It is incredibly common, affecting up to 1 in 4 adults in the UK.

Despite its name, heartburn has nothing to do with your heart! It is typically felt as a burning chest pain located right behind or at the lowest end of your breastbone. This discomfort often rises upwards and outwards, sometimes travelling all the way up to your throat. It can leave a sour, unpleasant or acidic taste in your mouth. You might also find yourself frequently clearing your throat, coughing, or experiencing hiccups. These symptoms often worsen after eating rich meals, when you bend over, or when you lie flat in bed at night.

With taboo still surrounding our digestive health, we know it can feel frustrating and uncomfortable to talk about, but we're here to flush away the stigma. Why? Because while heartburn can be a nuisance for most people, understanding your symptoms makes it easier to know when your guts might need a little extra care.



How should I treat

heartburn and acid reflux?

If you're experiencing short-term heartburn and acid reflux, they can usually be managed with some simple adjustments to your lifestyle, sleeping habits and diet.

Food and drink

Certain things are known to relax the valve at the bottom of your gullet or irritate it further. Watch out for rich or high-fat foods, spicy dishes, chocolate, peppermint, citrus fruits or juices, tomatoes, caffeine and fizzy drinks. Keeping a food diary can help you spot your triggers.

Sleeping position

If your symptoms are worse at night, try elevating the head of your bed or mattress by up to 20cm using a bed wedge. It's important to not just pile up pillows, as this can bend your waist and increase pressure. Many people also find that sleeping on their left side helps reduce reflux episodes.

Sleeping position

A range of over-the-counter remedies are available from pharmacies without a prescription. Antacids (liquids or tablets) neutralise stomach acid to offer fast, temporary relief. Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs) or H2 blockers work by reducing the amount of acid your stomach produces. These are usually best taken 30 minutes before breakfast or your evening meal. Your pharmacist can help advise you on what might work best.

Eating habits

Looking at how you eat, as well as what you eat, is important. Try eating smaller, more regular meals rather than large, heavy portions that overload your gut. Take your time, relax at mealtimes and chew each mouthful thoroughly.

The time you eat

Avoid eating late at night or having high-fat snacks right before bed. Aim to finish your main evening meal at least three hours before you lie down so your stomach has time to empty.

Reduce abdominal pressure

Avoid bending forward immediately after eating, and try not to wear tight clothes or belts that squeeze your tummy. This can physically push acid upwards. If you are carrying excess body weight, taking steps where possible to manage your weight can significantly relieve that upward pressure on your stomach.



How can I avoid

heartburn and acid reflux?

One of the best ways to keep heartburn and acid reflux at bay is by making positive daily lifestyle changes. This includes:

- Maintaining a calm, unhurried eating routine and not skipping breakfast.
- Avoiding lying flat or doing heavy exercise immediately after eating.
- Stopping smoking, as smoking can relax the lower oesophageal sphincter muscle, making reflux much more likely.
- Reducing your alcohol intake, as alcohol can trigger or worsen symptoms.

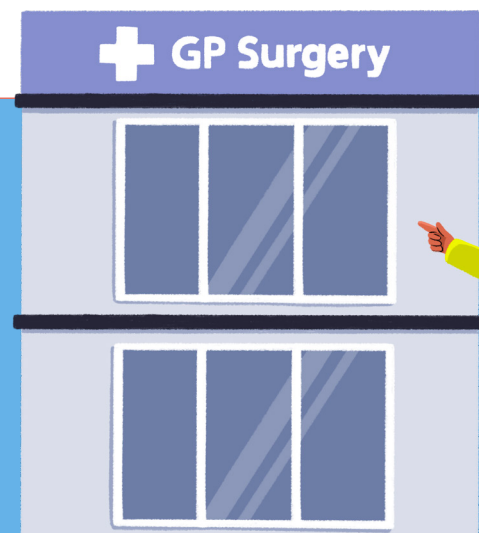
When should I seek medical advice?

For most people, acid reflux is a temporary discomfort. However, persistent acid reflux can sometimes lead to complications such as severe inflammation (oesophagitis), ulcers, or narrowing of the gullet. Around 1 in 10 people with long-term acid reflux develop a condition called Barrett's oesophagus, where the cells lining the gullet change. While rare, these changes can increase the risk of oesophageal cancer over time, which is why persistent symptoms should never be ignored.

You should seek medical advice from your doctor or NHS 111 if lifestyle changes and pharmacy medicines aren't helping, or if you have had heartburn, indigestion or hiccups most days for three weeks or more.

You must see your doctor urgently if you experience any of these "red flag" symptoms:

- Difficulty or pain when swallowing food.
- A feeling that food is getting stuck in your chest or gullet.
- Frequently feeling sick (nausea) or being sick (vomiting) for no known reason.
- Unintentional or unexplained weight loss.



How do I tell someone I have heartburn or acid reflux?

Telling your doctor

Your doctor is used to seeing people with heartburn and acid reflux, so be completely open with them. Describe exactly where you feel the burning, how often it happens, if it wakes you at night, and whether over-the-counter remedies help. This helps to make sure you get the right long-term care and treatment and helps the doctor to decide if you need a routine endoscopy to look at the upper part of your digestive system.

Telling your employer

You might want to tell your employer if frequent acid reflux is affecting your sleep, causing a persistent hoarse voice or causing chest discomfort that distracts you at work. Letting them know you are experiencing a digestive symptom can help them support you. That could be ensuring you can take regular, relaxed lunch breaks, or making sure you aren't required to do heavy physical bending or lifting right after eating.

Telling your family and friends

If you're experiencing heartburn and acid reflux, you can tell people about it. It's very likely they'll have experienced something similar before. When doing things such as eating out or visiting loved ones, it can help to be honest about your triggers. It can feel strange to bring it up but telling them what that means for you and what you need can be helpful.

How do I know what's normal for me?

Paying attention to how your body reacts to certain foods and lifestyle habits is a great step towards managing your gut health and comfort. While everyone's digestive triggers are unique, having a comfortable and pain-free chest and throat after eating is a sign of good upper-digestive health. If you're experiencing persistent symptoms, seek help from your doctor.

For more information about heartburn and acid reflux, including causes, diagnosis, treatment and support, go to gutscharity.org.uk/symptoms/heartburn-and-reflux.

Guts UK is the national charity for the digestive system. We provide information and support on more than 40 digestive conditions and symptoms, as well as health and lifestyle. Go to gutscharity.org.uk/information to find out more. Need support? Contact our Helpline on 0300 102 4887 or gutscharity.org.uk/helpline.

Please note, this information is intended for people without a diagnosed digestive condition. If you live with a digestive condition and need information and support for heartburn or acid reflux, please speak to your healthcare team.

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