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Heartburn - Learn to manage it!

It is important to know that despite the name, heartburn has nothing to do with the heart. It is in fact, a digestive problem which often occurs when stomach acid comes into contact with the lining of the esophagus, causing irritation. Heartburn is a burning sensation and pain in the stomach and chest, behind the breastbone. Usually after a meal, many people suffer from heartburn. If the heartburn occurs once a month, it is considered mild. If it occurs once a week, it is called moderate but when the heartburn occurs daily, it is considered to be severe or chronic.

Symptoms: The symptoms of heartburn though differ from person to person, includes bloating, gas, nausea, shortness of breath and/or an acidic or sour taste in the throat and mouth.

Causes: Heartburn is caused when hydrochloric acid, which is used to digest food, is released up the esophagus. When stomach acid refluxes i.e. it backs up into the esophagus and on its way up, the acid irritates the sensitive tissues in the esophagus and throat. When the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), the valve that keeps stomach acid in the stomach, is weakened or relaxed and does not do its job properly, acidity occurs. This is the most common symptom of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD); it is also known as dyspepsia, chronic heartburn or acid indigestion. Besides this as the main reason, there can be the following causes also;

- Certain foods, such as chocolate, fried and fatty foods, peppermint, coffee, alcohol, sugars etc.;
- Stress can increase acid production and slow down the emptying of the stomach;
- Eating large meals or shortly before bedtime;
- Pressure on the stomach, including frequent bending over, tight clothes, lifting, obesity;
- A hiatal hernia;
- Smoking and
- Some medications, including aspirin, certain antibiotics and some antidepressants and sedatives, may aggravate heartburn.

Managing the heartburn: Relief from the heartburn is possible with a few self-care remedies. This involves making some lifestyle and diet changes. Here are a few suggestions:

- Eat frequent smaller meals instead of three larger ones. This will help prevent excessive production of stomach acid;
- Eat slowly. One way to help slow down while eating is to put the fork or spoon down between bites;

- Don't go to bed with a full stomach. Stay up at least two hours after eating the last meal or large snack before going to bed. This gives acid levels a chance to decrease before the body is in a position where heartburn is more likely to occur;
- Raise the head of the bed several inches. With the head elevated, it will help prevent reflux during the night;
- Avoid heartburn triggers. Examples of foods and beverages that can trigger heartburn are coffee (including decaf), alcohol, fatty foods, caffeinated beverages and foods, onions, peppermint, chocolate, citrus fruits or juices, tomatoes etc. If not sure what triggers heartburn, keep a food diary for a week or two;
- Stop smoking. Nicotine can weaken the lower esophageal sphincter, the muscle that controls the opening between the esophagus and stomach and prevents the acid-containing contents of the stomach from entering the esophagus;
- Wear loose-fitting clothes. Tight clothing squeezes the midsection and tends to push stomach contents upward;
- Lose weight;
- Chewing gum can provide short-term heartburn relief by stimulating the production of saliva, which dilutes and flushes out stomach acid;
- Drink warm liquids. Drinking a glass of lukewarm water or herbal tea after a meal can dilute and flush out stomach acid;
- No matter how terrible is the acidity, stay upright. Avoid bending over after a meal, and definitely don't lie down;
- If nighttime heartburn is frequent, eat meals at least two to three hours before going to bed. The added time will give acid levels a chance to decrease; and
- Try sleeping on the left side, the stomach hangs down and fluids pool along the greater curvature, away from the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), the thick ring of muscle that separates the stomach from the esophagus and keeps stomach acid where it belongs. Pooled fluids stay farther away from the esophagus.

The following home remedies for heartburn may be useful to many:

- a. Papaya chewable tablets can be purchased in health stores and they are helpful reducing heartburn;
- b. Drink Aloe Vera juice to heal the intestinal tract; this green juice is highly alkaline, thus it can neutralize excess of stomach acid. The natural juice, with no additives, can be used to calm an irritated esophagus. However, high doses of aloe vera juice can cause diarrhea, abdominal pain and electrolyte imbalance.
- c. Drink Chamomile tea after meals to relieve esophageal irritation;
- d. Using Licorice to treat heartburn and stomach and esophagus ulcers is beneficial.
- e. The juices of vegetables like carrots, cucumbers, radishes, or beets help to tame the acid in the stomach due to their alkaline nature. Feel free to add a pinch of salt and pepper for flavour.
- f. Ginger is proven to be one of the most powerful natural remedies for heartburn. Drinking warm ginger tea should help alleviate heartburn in two

different ways. First ginger has the capacity to absorb acid from the stomach and second it has nerve-calming effects. Furthermore, ginger is a harmless natural herb with a broad dosage range. In other words it's safe to consume it regularly to prevent heartburn from recurring.

- g. Cabbage juice is an old and time tested remedy when it comes to preventing recurring heartburn pain. The juice is a natural anti-inflammatory and is a source of lactic acid making it a natural for all kinds of digestive troubles. To get the best results drink the juice in the morning on empty stomach.
- h. Baking soda or sodium bicarbonate is a natural antacid. In fact it's among the oldest and most well known home remedies for heartburn. It can act rapidly to neutralize excess acid in the stomach giving almost instant relief from heartburn pain. Try about a half a tablespoon dissolved in a glass of water. If this dosage is not effective, increase the amount of baking soda in the next dose.
- i. Apple cider vinegar is regarded a highly effective method of heartburn relief. Simply stir about 2 tablespoons of apple cider vinegar into ½ cup of water. However be prepared to stop taking it if suffer from excess acid and the symptoms worsen.

Remember, everyone is unique therefore individuals will respond differently to each remedy. An approach that works wonders for a friend might not work as well for you. Therefore, be prepared to experiment a bit to find out what the best solutions are for you. And never forget, if left untreated the repeated flow of acid through the esophagus can scar and produce changes in the cells lining, it can cause cancer later in life.

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