



“Plop, Plop, Fizz, Fizz”

Heartburn is a serious issue for many Americans, as its prevalence is on the rise. According to the American Gastroenterology Association, heartburn has increased from affecting 15 million Americans per year to 25 million, in just ten years. There are several culprits for this upward trend. Over-indulgence, weight gain around the abdomen, smoking, the popularity of spicy foods and our society’s obsession with caffeine all contribute to the noted increase.

So, what is heartburn? It is the burning sensation you have behind your breastbone. It is caused by the backflow of acid from your stomach into your esophagus. This backflow occurs when the valve between the stomach and esophagus relaxes. Normally, gravity keeps this valve closed, a reason why it is important to avoid lying down after a meal. The factors listed above can all cause the valve to relax – aiding in the backflow of acid.

There are several ways in which you can manage the incidence of heartburn yourself.

- **Eat less, maintain a healthy weight and avoid tight fitting clothing.** Over eating and a large midsection contribute to excess pressure on the abdomen, which causes the acid in the stomach to back up into the esophagus.
- **Limit coffee and alcohol intake.** Both of these increase acid production in the stomach.
- **Avoid trigger foods.** Foods that are commonly noted for causing heartburn include tomato sauce, mint, chocolate, caffeine, fatty & fried foods and garlic.
- **Don’t lie down after a meal.** It is best to wait at least three hours after eating before going to bed. When you do sleep, elevate the head of the bed. It is important to elevate the whole head of the bed, approximately 6 inches. Placing pillows under your head unfortunately won’t do the trick.

Heartburn should only occur occasionally. If it becomes frequent, it is likely you could be suffering from gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). When heartburn begins to affect your quality of life it is time to visit your primary physician. Some medications are available via prescription, these may treat heartburn more effectively than the over the counter antacids. In addition, do not take antacids with other medications before talking with your doctor. Medications that treat kidney and cardiac disease can become less effective when taken with antacids.

Keeping heartburn and GERD under control is important to prevent further complications. A disorder known as Barrett’s esophagus can occur after long term acid exposure, which can contribute to the development of cancer in that region.

In conclusion, heartburn can be uncomfortable and frustrating, but may be controlled with some basic life style changes.

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Sources: MayoClinic.com; The Merck Manual; The American Gastroenterology Association; WebMD