

Heartburn—putting out the fire

One out of ten people and one out of four pregnant women regularly experience heartburn. Chronic heartburn not only causes daily discomfort, but if left untreated can lead to more serious problems.

What is heartburn?

Heartburn is a burning pain in the lower chest along with a sour or bitter taste in the mouth.

Which conditions are associated with heartburn?

Pregnancy, hiatus hernia, smoking, being overweight, taking aspirin or anti-inflammatory medicines (e.g. Voltaren) are all associated with heartburn

What complications can occur?

Prolonged, severe reflux and heartburn may lead to the following:

- bleeding ulcers, scarring and narrowing of the oesophagus with difficulty in swallowing
- persistent sore throat, hoarseness, chronic cough and asthma; and
- cancer.

How can I avoid heartburn?

- stop smoking
- lose weight if overweight
- avoid large meals

- avoid food that aggravates heartburn, for example, coffee, alcohol and carbonated drinks, chocolate and peppermints, citrus fruits, tomato products and onions, and fatty and spicy meals (curry, pizza)
- wash all tablets down with a full glass of water
- avoid bending or lying down for 2-3 hours after a meal
- raise the head of your bed and sleep on your left side

What medical treatment is available?

Antacids neutralise stomach acid and relieve most heartburn symptoms quickly (e.g. Gaviscon, Mucaine, Maalox). Acid Inhibitors reduce or inhibit the production of stomach acid and prevent reflux for many hours allowing the inflamed oesophagus to heal. Some Acid Inhibitors (e.g. Lenamet, Histak) can be bought over the counter from your pharmacist, while the more potent acid suppressors (e.g. Losec, Lanzor, Nexiam) are available on doctor's prescription.

When should you consult your doctor?

- If you experience heartburn more than three times a week for over two weeks.
- If you do not get relief from over-the counter medications.
- If you have trouble swallowing.

- If you are vomiting blood.

What will your doctor do?

Your doctor can diagnose reflux based on your symptoms. Tests (gastroscopy or barium meal X-ray) may be required to confirm the diagnosis or to establish the damage to the oesophagus. Your doctor can prescribe Acid Inhibitors to relieve your symptoms and heal the damaged oesophagus. For severe complicated cases, your doctor may recommend surgery.

