

Acid Reflux

What is acid reflux?

Acid reflux is caused by the back flow of food and acids from the stomach into the esophagus – the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach. Your symptoms may include “heartburn” a burning feeling in the chest, or you may regurgitate small amounts of food or sour liquid back into your mouth.

Acid reflux may occur occasionally or frequently. Frequent or chronic acid reflux is referred to as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Other symptoms of acid reflux and GERD may include difficulty swallowing and coughing. Over time, the lining of the esophagus can become inflamed and damaged, a condition called esophagitis. Permanent damage to the esophagus may contribute to esophageal cancer.

Why does acid reflux occur?

Acid reflux can occur for a variety of reasons:

- Chemotherapy and/or radiation treatment can cause changes in your normal digestion.
- Surgeries can interfere with normal digestion.
- Certain medications and/or supplements can increase acid reflux and irritate the lining of the esophagus.
- Dry mouth can result in less bicarbonate production. Bicarbonate is a normal part of saliva that helps neutralize stomach acids every time you swallow.
- Eating patterns can influence stomach acid production and result in acid reflux. Too little food and too much food can contribute to acid reflux.
- Lying down after eating a large meal can also result in acid reflux.
- Certain activities, like bending at the waist, can increase the pressure in your stomach and cause acid reflux.
- Smoking
- Hernia
- Stomach ulcer

Eating certain foods may result in acid reflux. Foods that may contribute to symptoms include:

- Alcoholic beverages
- Black pepper
- Caffeine intake from sources such as coffee, soda, chocolate, and teas
- Vinegar
- Carbonated beverages
- Garlic
- Mint
- Raw onions
- Spicy and/or fatty foods
- Tomato and citrus fruits and juices (e.g., orange, grapefruit)

What can I do to prevent acid reflux?

Lifestyle changes, including changes in your diet, can be successful and are the best first approach to managing your acid reflux. Here are some changes that may work for you:

- Eat smaller meals more frequently, rather than large heavy meals less often.
- Avoid bending over at the waist after a meal.
- Avoid tight clothing. Tight belts, pants or skirts can increase the pressure on the stomach.
- Try not to lie down immediately after a meal. You may have the best results if you avoid lying down for at least two hours after eating. If you need to lie down, sit in a reclining chair or raise the head of your bed so your head is higher than your feet.
- Permanently elevate the head of your bed.
- Maintain a healthy weight: Excess weight increases the amount of pressure constantly placed on your stomach. Even small amounts of weight loss may help.
- Limit or avoid certain foods that are often associated with acid reflux. See foods on first page.
- Stop smoking.
- Reduce stress. Stress can slow down the emptying of the stomach, increasing chance of heartburn
- Try a guided meditation by following these steps:
 1. Sit comfortably in your chair. Allow your eyes to close. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
 2. Allow your belly to be soft. If you hear sounds, notice them and let them go.
 3. Bring your attention gently back to the breath, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth, allowing your belly to be soft, perhaps saying to yourself "soft" as you breathe in and "belly" as you breathe out.

4. If thoughts come, let them come and let them go. Gently bring your mind back to soft belly.
5. If part of your body feels tense, imagine that your breath is going to that part and softening it.
6. Open your eyes when you are ready. Come back...

Medications and acid reflux

Medication may be prescribed to control the acidity of your stomach. The acid in your stomach may not seem like a good thing, but it is important for your nutritional health. Your stomach acid helps to break down food, helps prevent bacteria and other environmental exposures from getting from your stomach to your blood stream, and helps our bodies use certain nutrients, including vitamin B12.

- **Supplements:** Some supplements may be associated with acid reflux, including iron and potassium.
- **Medications:** Talk with your doctor about medications. Take medications for heartburn as prescribed by your doctor. If they are not working let your doctor know.

Resources

- The Mayo Clinic: [mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heartburn/symptoms-causes/syc-20373223](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/heartburn/symptoms-causes/syc-20373223)
- National Digestive Diseases Information: [niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/acid-reflux-ger-gerd-adults](https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/acid-reflux-ger-gerd-adults)
- Reference: James Gordon, MD, Center for Mind Body Medicine, [cmbm.org/mind-body-medicine/soft-belly-breathing/](https://www.cmbm.org/mind-body-medicine/soft-belly-breathing/)

This education resource was intended to be given as a part of a nutrition consult by a Fred Hutch dietitian. Questions? Ask a Fred Hutch dietitian at nutrition@seattlecca.org.