

Treating heartburn with medications

Even with avoiding trigger foods and behaviors that cause heartburn, you may still feel the burn. Medications can help. Some work effectively to treat heartburn symptoms; others work better at keeping heartburn symptoms away.

Below are some heartburn medications that are available without a prescription. But if you take any other medication, check with your doctor or pharmacist before choosing any nonprescription heartburn medications.

1. Antacids (like Maalox[®], Mylanta[®], Tums[®], or Rolaids[®]) provide rapid relief by buffering acid that your stomach has already produced. Relief usually lasts one to two hours. Gaviscon[®] is an antacid that also contains alginic acid, which forms a barrier to prevent the reflux of acidic stomach contents into the esophagus.
2. Acid reducers, which include Pepcid AC[®], Zantac 75[®], Axid AR[®] and Tagamet HB[®], have a longer-lasting effect of reducing acid than the antacids — generally 6-10 hours. These medications are also available as cost-saving generics.
3. PPIs (proton pump inhibitors) significantly prevent the production of stomach acid by turning off active acid pumps. They may take longer to start working, but one dose of a PPI medication can provide effects that last up to 24 hours. Prilosec OTC[®] contains omeprazole, the same ingredient in prescription Prilosec, and is available without a prescription. The cost of Prilosec OTC is also significantly less than the prescription PPIs.

Talk to your doctor if . . .

- Lifestyle changes and over-the-counter medications don't help your heartburn.
- Heartburn symptoms become more severe.
- Heartburn occurs two or more times a week.
- You have extreme fatigue, weight loss or sudden difficulty swallowing.

Be specific about what lifestyle changes you have tried and what nonprescription medication you have taken.

Sometimes the sensation you're feeling isn't coming from the stomach. Know the following alarm symptoms, and talk to your doctor **immediately** if you . . .

- Experience chest pain that radiates to the neck, arms, or legs, or chest pain with shortness of breath, weakness, irregular pulse or sweating
- Vomit blood or black material
- Have black or bloody bowel movements



Putting out the fire:

How to control heartburn symptoms



**Blue Care
Network
of Michigan**

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Understanding heartburn

Heartburn, one of the most common ailments in the United States, affects more than 60 million American adults at least once a month.

Heartburn is a popular term for the uncomfortable burning sensation that occurs when partially-digested food and stomach acid back up into the esophagus and irritate its sensitive lining. This back-up is called reflux, and persistent heartburn is often called GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease).



Treating heartburn through self-care

One way to treat heartburn is to avoid the foods and behaviors that trigger attacks. Following these simple guidelines may take care of the problem.

- **Watch what you eat.**

Triggers include fatty or fried foods, citrus fruits or juices, tomato sauces, spicy foods, chocolate, peppermint, coffee, carbonated beverages and alcohol.



- **Don't gorge.**

Big meals overfill the stomach. And an over-stretched stomach can increase pressure on the muscle that's meant to keep stomach acid out of the esophagus. Try four or five small snack-like meals instead of three large ones.

- **Lose weight.**

Extra pounds increase pressure on the stomach and forcing acid up into the esophagus. That's why heartburn is so common among pregnant women. Start weight loss by increasing (low acid/non citrus) fruit, vegetables and high-fiber foods in your diet. Add regular exercise.

- **Chew gum or suck on candy.**

Sucking candy or chewing gum stimulates the production of saliva, a natural buffer of stomach acids, and may help heartburn symptoms. Avoid peppermint candies and gums, which can trigger symptoms.

- **Relax.**

Stress increases behaviors that trigger heartburn: eating high-fat foods, smoking, drinking caffeinated beverages. Try to relax while you eat, and relax between meals. Relaxation therapies, such as deep breathing, meditation, massage, tai chi and yoga, can help prevent and relieve heartburn.

- **Don't smoke.**

Tobacco inhibits saliva, the body's major buffer against damage to the esophagus. Tobacco may also stimulate stomach acid production and relax the muscle between the esophagus and the stomach, permitting acid backup.

- **Don't snack at bedtime.**

Allow enough time for your stomach to empty before you lie down. It's better to eat at least two to three hours before bedtime.

- **Raise the head of your bed.**

Gravity helps to keep the acid in the stomach where it should be. Lying flat in bed makes it easier for gastric acid to back up into your esophagus. Some people are helped by sleeping on their left side. Raising the head of your bed six to eight inches on blocks can also help reduce the backward flow of stomach contents.

- **Wear loose-fitting clothes.**

Tight clothes and belts can put pressure on your stomach, causing it to push acid into the esophagus.

- **Watch your posture.**

Avoid bending from the waist or stooping just after meals. Instead, try and bend from the knees, keeping the back straight. Eat your meals while sitting on an upright chair rather than slumped in front of the television.