

Nutrition Tips for Reflux (GERD)

What is reflux (also known as heartburn or GERD)?

Reflux is when the stomach contents flow back into and irritate the food pipe (esophagus). This often leads to a burning feeling in the chest that can spread to the throat. This is called heartburn. Reflux may also leave a bitter taste in the mouth or make it feel hard to swallow.

What causes reflux?

Most often, the cause is a weak or poorly working muscle sphincter at lower end of the esophagus. The way you eat and certain foods may be a part of this problem. Increased pressure on the abdominal area also can lead to reflux. Keeping a healthy body weight can help improve symptoms.

How You Eat

This may be more important than **what** you eat.

- Eat slowly, taking about 30 minutes for a meal.
- Chew foods well to make it easier to swallow and to help clear food from the esophagus more quickly. Try to not “wash” down partially chewed foods with liquids.
- Try to relax around meal times. Sit down for all meals and snacks, do not “grab” food on the run.
- Give your body enough time to feel satisfied by eating smaller meals more often. Try pausing mid-meal to check if you feel satisfied.
- Don’t eat too close to bedtime. Allow 2-3 hours before bedtime to digest your food.
- Sit upright for at least one hour after eating. If you can, try gentle walking for 15 minutes after eating. Even getting up to wash dishes or do

laundry may help food to move as it should.

What You Eat

Each person reacts in different ways to foods. Try new foods to learn which diet changes work for you. If your symptoms do not get better after cutting a food out of your diet, there is no need to avoid it.

- Eat protein-rich foods in small amounts throughout the day, rather than one large meal. Lean proteins include chicken, turkey, tuna, tofu, lean beef and pork, low fat cheese, skim or 1% milk, and dried beans.
- Eat less high fat foods like deep fried foods, fatty ground beef, marbled meats, sausage, hot dogs, brats, chicken nuggets, chicken wings, whole milk, chocolate, regular salad dressings, donuts, pastries, candy bars, etc. Fat takes longer to digest and may worsen reflux.
- Avoid coffee (decaf and regular), caffeinated tea and all carbonated drinks. The effect of decaf tea on reflux is unclear.
- Avoid alcohol, peppermint or spearmint candies, gums and liquors.
- Try eating less citrus fruits and juices, highly seasoned (garlic and onion or spicy foods), as well as tomato products. Some people feel worse with these foods.
- Choose whole-grain and high-fiber foods often, to promote healthy bowel function. It will also reduce your risk of cancer of esophagus.
- Limit chewing gum and hard candies, as well as use of drinking fountains. This will decrease the amount of swallowed air which often leads to belching and reflux. Some

people find that chewing a non-mint flavored gum for 30 minutes after a meal increases saliva and swallowing.

Other Lifestyle Tips

- Avoid cigarettes, tobacco products or nicotine replacements.
- Ask your primary care provider or pharmacist about medicine that may help reflux.
- Plan some physical activity every day to help maintain good bowel function.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Avoid excessive weight gains and losses. Excess abdominal fat puts pressure on your stomach, which makes reflux worse.
- Elevate the head of your bed 4-6 inches. Avoid reclining for up to 3 hours after a meal. Adding more pillows does not work, but you can purchase a special foam wedge. One idea is called Mattress Genie[®] Adjustable Bed Wedge at www.contourliving.com.
- Try sleeping on your left side. Think “right is wrong.”
- Keep a daily diary for a week to figure out foods or habits that cause symptoms. You can download a form at https://iffgd.org/images/library/Adult/Gastroesophageal_Reflux_Disease/Symptoms/7-DayDiary.pdf

Find out more about reflux at: www.aboutger.org. (International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders)

Who to Call

If you are a UW Health patient and have more questions, please contact UW Health at one of the phone numbers listed below. You can also visit our website at www.uwhealth.org/nutrition.

Nutrition clinics for UW Hospital and Clinics (UWHC) and American Family Children’s Hospital (AFCH) can be reached at: **(608) 890-5500**.

Nutrition clinics for UW Medical Foundation (UWMF) can be reached at: **(608) 287-2770**.

If you are a patient receiving care at UnityPoint – Meriter, Swedish American or a health system outside of UW Health, please use the phone numbers provided in your discharge instructions for any questions or concerns.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 3/2021 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#597

Quick Tips to Avoid Heartburn and Reflux



Avoid spicy, acidic, tomato-based or fatty foods like chocolate, tomatoes, citrus fruits, fruit juices, and peppermint.



Limit your intake of coffee, tea, alcohol and colas.



Stop (or at least reduce) smoking.



Eat meals at least 3-4 hours before lying down.

Elevate the head of your bed 4-6 inches.



Watch your weight. Being overweight increases pressure in your abdomen which can make reflux worse).



Don't overeat at mealtime. Eat moderate amounts of food.



Don't exercise too soon after eating.



See your doctor if you are taking antacids 3 or more times a week.