

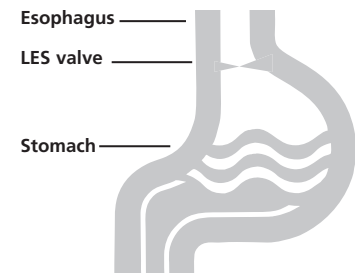
Do you have:

- Burning and pressure in your chest, especially after you eat?
- A bitter or sour acid taste in the back of your throat?

If so, you might have heartburn. Heartburn is also known as reflux, GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease), and acid indigestion. Heartburn is very common. About 60 million Americans experience heartburn at least once a month.

What is heartburn?

Heartburn has nothing to do with your heart, but it can feel like pressure near the heart. It can also cause a burning pain in your chest, just above your stomach. Heartburn is caused when stomach acid flows backward into the esophagus, a tube



that runs from your throat to your stomach. The backward flow of acid is called reflux.

Normally, stomach acid is kept in place by a muscular valve between the esophagus and stomach. This valve is called the LES (lower esophageal sphincter) valve. If the LES valve doesn’t work right, acid can flow backward into the esophagus, causing burning pain, irritation, and sometimes tissue damage.

What causes heartburn?

For most people, the main causes of heartburn are what they eat and their lifestyle habits. Health problems, such as hernias can also cause heartburn because they can weaken the LES valve between the esophagus and stomach.

Certain medicine, such as tranquilizers, pain medicine, and asthma drugs, can make heartburn worse. If you’re taking any of these and you have heartburn, talk with your doctor.

Is heartburn serious?

Heartburn is a minor problem for most people. It can usually be managed by making a few simple lifestyle changes and using over-the-counter medicine.

How is heartburn treated?

If you have heartburn that’s mild or doesn’t happen very often, you might be able to control it by making some changes in your lifestyle and taking an over-the-counter medicine. If you have heartburn that’s more serious, or happens often, even after making lifestyle changes and taking over-the-counter medicine, talk to your doctor about other options.

Medicine for heartburn

Over-the-counter antacids, acid-blockers, and proton-pump inhibitors can help when heartburn happens only once in awhile. These medicines can help relieve heartburn, but might not make the symptoms go away completely. We’ve listed some products that can help.

Check with your pharmacist to see if generic versions of these products are available.

Antacids

Antacids such as Maalox, Mylanta, Mylanta Supreme, Tums, and Gaviscon, reduce the effect of stomach acid and make you feel better quickly. Because antacids only last up to 3 hours, you have to take them several times a day.

Liquid antacids usually work better than tablets. They taste best when refrigerated. If you prefer to take antacid tablets instead of a liquid, make sure to chew them completely and drink water afterwards. Certain antacid tablets, such as Gaviscon, might work well for you because they create a soothing foam that protects your esophagus from stomach acids. Antacids are safe for most people. Be sure to read the label for any precautions.

Acid blockers and proton-pump inhibitors

Acid blockers, such as Pepcid AC, Tagamet HB, and Zantac 75 and proton-pump inhibitors, such as Prilosec and Prevacid, are also available over the counter. They lessen the amount of acid that your stomach makes and can be taken with antacids if needed. These take longer to work than antacids, but they last longer and you only need to take them once or twice a day. Be sure to read the directions. Some of these medicines should not be used for more than a couple of weeks without talking to your doctor.

Serious or frequent heartburn

If you have heartburn more than 3 times a week, or if it lasts for more than 2 weeks, even after making lifestyle changes and

taking medicine, you might need longer-term treatment. Talk to your doctor about the options available to help relieve your heartburn.

Some heartburn medicine may increase the risk for hip fracture if taken for long periods of time. If you have concerns, talk to your doctor about this risk and the importance of taking a ‘break’ from using medicine for your heartburn.

When should I call my doctor?

If heartburn is serious and doesn’t go away, it can cause ulcers, damage the esophagus, and even cause cancer. Call your doctor if you have any of the following:

- Shortness of breath.
- Trouble swallowing or feeling like your food is ‘sticking’ as it goes down.
- Weight loss of more than 10 pounds that you can’t explain.
- Symptoms of heartburn every day, or on most days.
- Symptoms of heartburn that last longer than 6 months.
- Severe pain radiating to your back.
- Repeated vomiting or spitting up blood.

Lifestyle changes

Some simple lifestyle changes can help with your heartburn. These include making changes in what and when you eat, losing weight if you’re overweight, and watching how you sit or lie down after eating. The 7 steps listed on the next page can help you SQUELCH the burn.

7 practical, everyday things you can do to SQUELCH the burn

Sit up straight during meals. Stand up or walk around after eating to help prevent reflux. Wait 2 to 3 hours after eating before you lie down.

Quit tobacco. Tobacco causes the stomach to make more acid. It also relaxes the LES valve. This makes it harder for the valve to keep food from backing up when you swallow, causing heartburn.

Use a diary to track how often you get heartburn. This can help you find out what causes your heartburn.

Eat smaller meals. Try not to eat too much or too fast. Eating a large meal can make your stomach so full that acid and gastric juices leak through the LES valve, especially when you bend over or lie down.

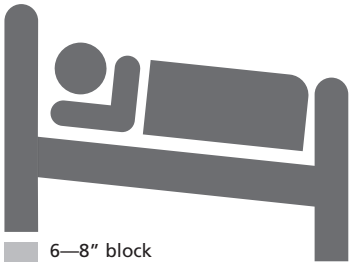
Loosen up. Avoid wearing tight clothing or belts that put extra pressure on the stomach. If you are overweight, losing weight can help.

Cut out foods and drinks that cause heartburn. These include greasy or fatty foods, foods that are spicy or have a lot of acid (like citrus fruits and tomatoes), as well as chocolate and peppermint. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and carbonated beverages--they cause heartburn by relaxing the LES valve and increasing the amount of acid your stomach makes.

Hide up the head of your bed. If you have heartburn at night, you might find it helps to raise the head of your bed by 6 to 8 inches by using sturdy blocks or a bed wedge.

Bed blocks

Use blocks under the head of your bed to raise it up 6-8 inches to help prevent heartburn at night.

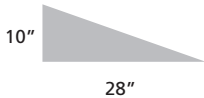


Bed wedges

Buy a wedge and place it on your mattress to raise your chest, not just your head. Don't place the wedge under the mattress.



Look for a bed wedge that is 10 inches tall, 28 inches long, and 24 inches wide.



Pillows don't work as well as a wedge because they bend only part of your upper body, which can make your heartburn worse. You can buy a bed wedge at many medical supply stores.

It's a good idea to keep following these steps, even when you're feeling better. Heartburn can be a lifelong problem. You can prevent a lot of discomfort by making these lifestyle changes a permanent part of your routine.

Additional Resources

The Consulting Nurse Service is available to Kaiser Permanente members who have medical questions or concerns. Call 24-hours a day: toll-free 1-800-297-6877.

Visit the Kaiser Permanente website at kp.org/wa for more health information in our Health and Wellness Resources section.

Adapted with permission from Kaiser Permanente Pharmacy Services, California; Squelch the Burn Campaign 6/02.

This information is not meant to diagnose health problems or to replace the advice of your doctor.

Heartburn SQUELCH the burn

