



## Reflux disease

### What are the symptoms of reflux?

If you experience heartburn at least twice a week, you may have gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GORD. Reflux affects 20% of adults on a daily. Reflux may be experienced as a burning sensation in the centre of the chest, which spreads to the throat causing an acid taste. Other symptoms include stomach pain, chest pain, difficulty swallowing, food sticking, painful swallowing, persistent hoarseness, sore throat, chronic cough, asthma, regurgitation of foods/fluids, acid in the throat, dental disease, & pneumonia.

### What is GORD?

Acid from the stomach flows back (refluxes) into the esophagus, causing irritation and sometimes damage to the lining of the esophagus. Damage occurs when acid is refluxed too frequently, is too acidic, and when the esophagus is unable to clear the acid quickly.

### How is GORD treated?

- ◆ **Avoid reflux inducing foods** - chocolate, peppermint, fatty foods, acidic foods, citrus fruits, spices, tomatoes
- ◆ **Avoid reflux inducing drinks** – caffeine, alcohol, citrus drinks, coca cola,
- ◆ **Avoid late meals** — Lying down with a full stomach makes reflux more likely. Avoid lying for 3 hours after meals
- ◆ **Eat smaller meals** — Eating smaller meals helps prevent the stomach from becoming over-distended
- ◆ **Elevate the bed head** by 15cm (about 1 brick or phone book)
- ◆ **Avoid medications that worsen reflux** - arthritis pills, Aspirin, Theophylline, tricyclics antidepressants
- ◆ **Weight loss** — In significantly overweight people, losing weight may help reduce reflux.
- ◆ **Quit smoking** - Smoking reduces saliva that neutralises acid and lowers the pressure in the esophageal sphincter,
- ◆ **Avoid wearing tight clothes** — Tight fitting garments can raise stomach pressure,
- ◆ **Promote salivation by chewing gum** - This will help to clear stomach acid

### Can GORD be cured?

Medications cannot cure GORD but they can alleviate symptoms and prevent damage to the esophagus. **Acid reducing medications** can broadly be further divided into two groups: "H2 antagonists" such as Zantac, and "proton pump inhibitors" **Nexium, Losec, Zoton, Somac, Pariet**. Treatment is usually long term.

### Surgical treatment

Currently the most popular is laparoscopic Nissen fundoplication. Surgery involves repairing the hiatal hernia and strengthening the lower esophageal sphincter. Although the outcome of surgery is usually good, serious and less serious but bothersome complications can occur. Examples include persistent difficulty swallowing, bloating and gas, and the ongoing need for acid reducing drugs.

### What are complications from UNTREATED reflux?

The vast majority of patients with GORD will not develop serious complications, however, complications can occur.

- ◆ **Ulcers** —result of burning from stomach acid. In some cases, bleeding occurs.
- ◆ **Stricture** — Damage from acid can cause the esophagus to scar and narrow, causing a stricture.
- ◆ **Sore throat or hoarse voice** - If acid is refluxed into the throat, or lungs it may cause pneumonia or asthma.
- ◆ **Esophageal cancer** - Barrett's is a risk factor for cancer. Untreated reflux has a 10 fold risk of cancer
- ◆ **Barrett's esophagus** —The normal cells lining the lower part of the esophagus are replaced by a different cell as an adaptation to the chronic acid exposure. The problem with this adaptation is that the intestinal cells have a small potential to transform into cancer cells. Because of this cancer potential, patients with Barrett's esophagus are advised to have periodic endoscopies so that early warning signs of cancer will be detected.