

UNDERSTANDING GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE

The holiday season is here and the celebrations are just beginning. Festivities with family and friends and seasonal company parties are frequent this time of year. During this time, it can be easy to overindulge in the fun, as well as the food and drink. However, the effects of excessive eating or drinking can lead to serious consequences. One of these effects is gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). According to the American Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy, GERD affects about 20% of American adults. Of these adults, most experience symptoms of the disease on a daily to weekly basis.



What is GERD and how is it different from heartburn?

GERD occurs when contents from the stomach flow back into the esophagus, causing irritation or damage to its lining. The esophagus is the tube in the gastrointestinal tract that food passes through to get to the stomach. GERD is a chronic condition and is more serious than heartburn. If left untreated, more severe health complications can develop.

Heartburn is considered a temporary condition that causes pain or a burning sensation in the throat and chest. This happens when acid from the stomach flows back into the esophagus. Chronic heartburn is often a sign of GERD. However, not everyone with GERD will also experience heartburn.

What are the risk factors for GERD?

GERD can affect anyone, regardless of age. Several risk factors include:

- being pregnant
- some medications
- smoking or being exposed to secondhand smoke
- being overweight or obese

What are the signs and symptoms of GERD?

Heartburn and regurgitation are the most common symptoms of GERD. Other symptoms include sore throat, nausea and vomiting, and pain in the chest or upper abdomen. Additionally, a dry and chronic cough, wheezing, and bad breath can occur.

Why is it important to manage GERD?

It is important to treat and maintain GERD as it can worsen and cause other problems over time. These complications, sometimes serious, are listed below.

- esophagitis
- difficult or painful swallowing
- trouble breathing (respiratory problems)
- Barrett's esophagus (increases the risk of esophageal cancer)

What are the treatment options for GERD?

Treatment for GERD mainly focuses on the prevention or reduction of symptoms. The symptoms of the disease can vary depending on severity.

For many, lifestyle modifications alleviate problematic symptoms. These adjustments are listed in the table below.

<i>Lifestyle Change</i>	<i>Recommendation</i>
eating healthy	decrease fat intake by eating healthier, smaller meals at least 2 hours before bedtime; remain upright for at least 3 hours after eating; avoid foods and drinks that contribute to heartburn (chocolate, coffee, peppermint, greasy or spicy foods, and alcoholic beverages)
dressing appropriately	wear loose-fitting clothing, particularly around the stomach area
quitting smoking	quit smoking and avoid second-hand smoke as much as possible
losing weight	seek with a doctor regarding weight loss, if appropriate
sleeping better	raise the head of the bed by 6 to 8 inches and secure the bed in this position and not just use extra pillows

Numerous medications are also available to treat or prevent GERD when lifestyle adjustments are not enough. Several of these drugs are available over the counter.

Lastly, surgery can be considered in severe cases of GERD. Make sure to speak to your doctor regarding any lifestyle changes, medications, or surgical procedures that may be best for you.