



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# Heartburn and Indigestion

**Indigestion is an uncomfortable feeling associated with eating or drinking. Heartburn is a painful, burning feeling in the upper abdomen or chest, or up into the throat. Simple lifestyle changes can often help to relieve these symptoms and there are also medicines that can help.**

## Indigestion

Indigestion is a general term for upper gastrointestinal discomfort associated with eating and drinking.

Indigestion includes:

- Abdominal discomfort, pain or cramps
- Belching
- Nausea, loss of appetite
- A bloated or full stomach feeling.

Indigestion is sometimes associated with taking certain medicines.

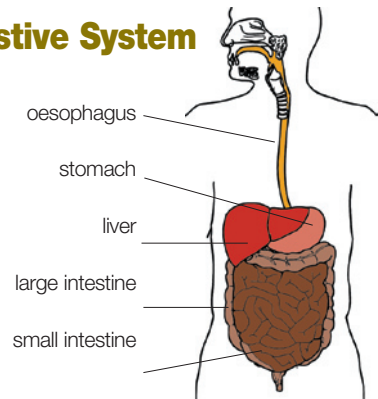
## Heartburn

Heartburn is a common type of indigestion. It occurs when stomach acid refluxes (flows back up) into the oesophagus (food pipe) and irritates the inner lining of the oesophagus. This reflux happens when the valve that separates the oesophagus and the stomach does not close properly. Symptoms are often made worse by lying down, bending forward or straining.

Symptoms of reflux include:

- Heartburn, which is a painful burning feeling in the centre of the upper abdomen or chest, sometimes moving up to the back of your throat

## The Digestive System



- A feeling of a 'lump' deep in your throat
- An acidic, sour or bitter taste in your mouth
- Regurgitation of food or fluid into the mouth
- Dry cough
- Sore throat.

Frequent heartburn and reflux symptoms can be signs of gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD). GORD involves repeated reflux of stomach acid which can cause inflammation and damage to the lining of the oesophagus.

## Important

Consult a doctor if:

- It is the first time you have experienced symptoms, especially if you are over 40 years
- You experience indigestion, heartburn or other symptoms of reflux several times a week
- Heartburn wakes you at night
- Symptoms are getting worse or are severe
- Symptoms are constant or keep returning, even with treatment
- It is difficult or painful to swallow
- Your bowel motions are black and tar-like or have blood in them
- You vomit and your vomit looks like coffee grounds or has blood in it
- You have lost weight and do not know why
- Symptoms get worse with or after exercise
- You have shortness of breath, sweating or pain radiating to your jaw, neck or arm.

## Medicines

Medicines can relieve or prevent symptoms of indigestion and heartburn. Some are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. Pharmacists can advise on the best medicine for you and whether you should consult a doctor. Some of these medicines may interfere with other medicines that you take. Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.

The medicines used for indigestion, heartburn and gastro-oesophageal reflux disease include:

- Antacids – which neutralise stomach acid. They may help relieve mild occasional symptoms
- Alginates – which form a coating or raft on top of stomach contents. They may help relieve mild occasional symptoms

- H2 antagonists (e.g., ranitidine, famotidine, nizatidine) – which reduce histamine-mediated acid secretion in the stomach
- Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) (e.g., esomeprazole, omeprazole, pantoprazole, lansoprazole, rabeprazole) – which block the system that pumps acid into the stomach.

Sometimes medicines that relieve nausea (e.g., metoclopramide, domperidone) can also help relieve indigestion.

**Note:** PPIs and H2 antagonists, which reduce production of stomach acid, are also used to protect the inner lining of the stomach and oesophagus during treatment with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

## Risk factors

Things that increase the chances of getting indigestion, and heartburn or reflux include:

- Certain foods (e.g., rich, spicy and fatty food, chocolate and peppermint)
- Alcohol
- Caffeine
- A large meal
- Eating quickly
- Physical activity soon after a large meal
- A diet low in fibre
- Stress and anxiety
- Being overweight
- Wearing tight waist bands or belts
- Pregnancy, particularly late pregnancy
- Smoking
- Certain medicines (e.g., aspirin, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, alendronate, risedronate, doxycycline, minocycline) – ask a pharmacist for information.

- Don't eat for 2-3 hours before going to bed
- Do not slump in a chair, bend over or lie down soon after meals
- Go for a short walk after your main meal
- Wear loose clothing around your waist
- Elevate the head of the bed
- Reach and keep to a healthy weight
- Don't smoke
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress.

## Related fact cards

- *Exercise and the Heart*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Smoking series*
- *Weight and Health*

## For more information

**Heartburn and heartburn friendly recipes** – website [www.heartburn.com.au](http://www.heartburn.com.au)

**HEALTHInsite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

## Self care

Try to identify and avoid things that make your symptoms worse. Simple changes to diet and lifestyle that can often prevent or reduce the symptoms of indigestion and heartburn include:

- Eat less fatty and spicy food, chocolate, peppermints and other known problem foods
- Eat smaller meals
- Eat slowly and chew food well
- Reduce alcohol consumption
- Reduce caffeine consumption (e.g., coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks)

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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