

How to Treat Painful Reflux Naturally

By Lynn Allison

Heartburn, reflux, and other stomach ailments are on the rise, and unfortunately the medications used to treat these conditions have troubling side effects. Fortunately, safer natural remedies may be just as effective.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), a digestive disorder that causes heartburn and other uncomfortable symptoms, affects nearly a third of U.S. adults each week, according to a recent study conducted by Cedars-Sinai. Also known as acid reflux, GERD is caused when gastric acid from the stomach flows back into the esophagus. This can happen when the lower esophageal sphincter — a muscle that briefly opens to let food into the stomach and closes to keep food inside — relaxes too often or for too long.

Neel Choksi, M.D., a leading gastroenterologist at the Kelsey-Seybold Clinic in Houston tells *Health Radar* that, in his experience, the incidence of GERD may be even higher than noted in the Cedars-Sinai study. “GERD is an extremely common condition, and some studies have found that approximately half of adults in the U.S. will experience it at some point in their lifetime. Typical symptoms include heartburn and regurgitation, although a number of patients experience silent GERD with no symptoms,” he says.

Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., a board-certified internist, and the author of the Cures A-Z phone app, explains that as we age, our ability to digest food efficiently declines.

“When you have poor digestion, food can sit in the stomach for longer than the usual 30 to 45 minutes,” he explains. “Then it can squirt back into the esophagus, burning its sensitive lining.”

Medication Side Effects

The most commonly prescribed medications for GERD are proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs), says Choksi. These drugs, such as omeprazole and esomeprazole, block the production of acid in the stomach. “Several short-term and long-term side effects are attributed to PPIs, including decreased absorption of calcium and magnesium, certain types of pneumonia and diarrhea, and even kidney disease.”

Teitelbaum paints an even darker picture of the dangers of PPI medications. “Research suggests that these drugs contribute to about 30,000 excess U.S. deaths annually,” he says. “Chronic use of these medications is associated with a 44 percent higher risk of dementia and a 25 percent higher risk of death.”

Natural Alternatives

Choksi advises discussing the risks and benefits of continuing a PPI with your doctor. In the meantime, he suggests instituting lifestyle and dietary changes to treat the root cause of GERD. For example, avoiding or minimizing foods known to trigger GERD. These include tomatoes, onions, garlic, caffeine, chocolate, peppermint, and alcohol. Losing weight and elevating your head

with a wedged-shaped pillow can also help. Eating smaller meals and not eating within four hours of bedtime can be effective strategies for reducing GERD as well. Wearing loose clothing can put less pressure on your stomach and alleviate symptoms.

For acute symptoms, try an over-the-counter medication such as Roloids, says Teitelbaum. “This mixture of calcium plus magnesium is much healthier than plain calcium antacids,” he says. “For more intensive care, use 10 to 20 milligrams of famotidine (Pepcid AC) or 200 milligrams of cimetidine (Tagamet) at bedtime or twice a day as needed.”

To neutralize stomach acid, mix one-half teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda with four ounces of water and drink it at bedtime. People with high blood pressure should choose food grade potassium bicarbonate, available at health food stores and online.

Ellen Kamhi, Ph.D., author of *The Natural Medicine Chest*, says sipping chamomile tea can help calm an upset stomach. It also helps reduce stress and anxiety that may trigger digestive disorders.

Ginger root can reduce the likelihood of stomach acid flowing up into the esophagus. It can be peeled and grated for use in cooking or steeped in hot water to make ginger tea. The most important thing to remember about taking ginger is moderation, says Kamhi. Sticking to four grams (a bit less than a fourth of a cup) should be enough to give relief. □