

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## **To fight heartburn, know its triggers**

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Heartburn is more than a minor annoyance, physician Art Mollen of Phoenix says.

Question: What is heartburn?

Answer: The term we use for it now is GERD, or gastroesophageal reflux disease. It occurs when the muscle at the lower end of the esophagus is weak or relaxes too frequently and allows acid to come up from the stomach and into the esophagus, producing a warm, burning, painful sensation behind the breastbone.

Q: How can people tell the difference between heart pain and heartburn?

A: Sometimes that's difficult even for cardiologists, so you can't simply ignore the symptoms. The heart is at the lower end of the esophagus, and that's pretty much the area where the burning sensation of heartburn is felt. With a heart attack, there may be a more specific, crushing chest pain and heaviness. You shouldn't discount any chest pain, even if you're only 30 years old. To play it safe, see your doctor.

Q: If it's not your heart, what could it be?

A: You need to make sure you don't have an underlying problem such as H. pylori, a bacterial infection that can cause heartburn and stomach ulcers. Another condition is Barrett's esophagus, a change in the cells lining of the esophagus that's brought on by long-term exposure to stomach acid. If you continue to experience heartburn, you may need an endoscopy to look into the stomach and esophagus to see exactly what's causing the problem.

Q: What triggers heartburn?

A: Smoking is the Number 1 contributor, because nicotine relaxes the valve between the esophagus and stomach. Trigger foods and beverages are alcohol, chocolate, peppermint, coffee, carbonated drinks, orange or grapefruit juice, tomatoes, pepper, vinegar, ketchup, mustard and spicy or fatty foods. Many people don't realize that non-steroidal, anti-inflammatories like ibuprofen and aspirin can cause heartburn.

Q: Besides avoiding those triggers, what lifestyle changes will help?

A: Try to eat a moderate-size meal two to three hours before bedtime so that you're upright while the food digests. Placing blocks under your bed to raise the head about six to eight inches also may help. After a meal, chew gum to stimulate saliva and speed the movement of your stomach contents to the intestines, but not spearmint or peppermint gum, which can trigger heartburn. Losing weight is important, and so is exercising, even if it seems like you have heartburn while doing it.

Q: How is heartburn treated?

A: For years, people have taken Tums, Maalox and Mylanta to reduce acidity. Now prescription medicines known as proton-pump inhibitors, including Nexium, Protonix, Prilosec and Aciphex, have become the gold standard. They reduce the abnormal backflow of acids, prevent injury to the lining of the esophagus and help it to heal. Prior to those, people took -- and still do -- histamine-2 blockers such as Pepcid, Tagamet and Zantac. Both categories of medicine now have some over-the-counter versions in lower doses.

Q: Can people take these indefinitely?

A: My biggest concern would be to have someone taking Tums or other over-the-counter remedies for weeks or months, thinking they're treating themselves for heartburn and then finding out they have stomach cancer or pancreatic cancer or another serious condition.

And although many pregnant women have heartburn, I wouldn't want them to take these over-the-counter medications without the consent of their physician, simply because we don't know the long-term effects on the fetus. But could they take some Tums? Yes, those probably shouldn't be a problem.

Q: What about natural remedies for anyone with heartburn, pregnant or otherwise?

A: Ginger has been recommended, but I continue to see mixed reviews and don't recommend it for pregnant women. Cabbage juice can be helpful in reducing acidity, and that might be something even a pregnant woman could try. A high-fiber diet and decaffeinated teas also may help. Drinking water at the end of a meal may dilute stomach acid and reduce heartburn.

In fact, I've found with my patients drinking a large glass of ice water often relieves heartburn, as well as the fear that they may be experiencing a heart attack. I haven't seen heart attacks relieved by ice water.