PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

This information explains the causes, symptoms, and treatment of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

About GERD

GERD is a disorder where the contents of your stomach flow back into your esophagus. Your esophagus is the tube that carries food and liquids from your mouth to your stomach (see Figure 1).

GERD can cause esophagitis, which is inflammation (redness and swelling) of the lining in your esophagus. If you don’t treat esophagitis, it can cause ulcers (sores), bleeding and narrowing in your esophagus. It may also increase your risk for esophageal cancer.

Causes of GERD

GERD can be caused by many things, including:

- Eating large meals
- Eating and drinking large amounts of:
Fried or fatty foods
Spicy foods
Citrus fruits (oranges, lemons, grapefruits, and limes)
Chocolate
Mints
Tomatoes
Caffeinated drinks (coffee, tea, and soda)

- Exercising after a meal
- Lying down, especially after meals. This can make it easier to regurgitate (when food moves from the stomach to the esophagus, creating a sour, acidic taste from your stomach fluid).
- Smoking
- Drinking alcohol
- Having a hiatal hernia (bulging of the top of your stomach through the muscle that separates your abdomen and chest (diaphragm)).
- Pregnancy
- Obesity
- Pressure on the abdomen (belly). This can happen if you:
  - Strain while having a bowel movement due to constipation (having fewer bowel movements than usual).
  - Strain while coughing, bending or lifting.
  - Wear pants that are too tight in the waist. This pressure can squeeze stomach contents up and into your esophagus.

Symptoms of GERD

The symptoms of GERD may include:

- Heartburn (a burning sensation in your chest) that usually happens 30 to 60
minutes after eating

- Regurgitation
- Trouble swallowing
- Chest pain
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Feeling like you have a lump in your throat

**Treatment for GERD**

The goal of treatment for GERD is to reduce your symptoms. Most people feel better with medication and lifestyle changes. Here are some ways you can reduce your GERD symptoms:

- Don’t eat large meals. Eat smaller meals more often. This will allow you to eat the same amount of food overall, but in smaller portions that will be easier to digest.
- Don’t lie down for at least 2 to 3 hours after eating.
- Avoid late-night snacks.
- Avoid some foods such as:
  - Acidic juices, such as orange juice
  - Alcohol
  - Peppermint candy, gum or mints
  - Caffeinated drinks such as coffee, tea, and cola soft drinks
  - Fatty foods
- Take antacids (medication that relieves the acid in your stomach) or sit upright to reduce heartburn.
- Don’t smoke cigarettes or use other tobacco products. If you want to quit smoking and would like help, call our Tobacco Treatment Program at 212-610-
You can also ask your nurse for information about the program.

- Use blocks or wedges to elevate the head of your bed to help with symptoms at night.
- Avoid putting pressure on your abdomen.
  - Limit bending and vigorous exercise after eating.
  - Avoid tight-fitting clothes/pants.
- Prevent or manage constipation. For more information about how to manage constipation, read the resource *Constipation* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/constipation](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/constipation)).
- If you’re overweight, lose weight. Try to stay at a healthy weight. For more information about making healthy food and exercise choices, read our resource *Eat Your Way to Better Health* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/eat_better_health](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/eat_better_health)).
- Make sure to take any medication your doctor prescribes you as instructed.

**Call your doctor or nurse if:**

- Your symptoms don’t get better after trying the treatments above.
- If you have trouble swallowing.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.