

GASTRO ESOPHAGEAL REFLUX

Purnachander Bikkasani M.D.

Gastro esophageal Reflux (GER) is a condition wherein the gastric acid flows back into the esophagus, resulting in symptoms such as heartburn, regurgitation and chest pain mimicking a heart attack. GER can also present as asthma, chronic cough, pneumonia and inflammation in the larynx and pharynx. Therefore, not uncommonly, your primary doctor, a gastroenterologist, a lung doctor and an ear/nose/throat doctor are involved as a team while treating a severe case of GER.

Mild GER is a common occurrence in some normal people. This type happens after a meal during daytime, often lasting only for brief periods and responds well to antacids such as Tums, Gaviscon, Mylanta and dietary discretion. However, if you are over forty years old, I recommend you see your family physician for specific evaluation and treatment.

Severe GER is associated with a severe and longer duration of heartburn, occurs during night and day and is often associated with hiatal hernia and pulmonary complications.

The mainstay of therapy is lifestyle modifications:

- Avoid lying down within 3 hours of eating
- Avoid food, beverages and eating habits that cause symptoms, such as fatty foods, large meals, chocolate, carminatives (peppermint or spearmint), alcohol and foods and beverages containing caffeine
- Stop cigarette smoking
- Wear loose-fitting clothes
- Lose weight
- Raise head of bed 4 to 6 inches on blocks for nighttime symptoms
- Use over-the-counter pills like Pepcid AC, Zantac, Tagamet

See your doctor if:

- You fail to improve with the above treatment
- You are over 40 years of age
- Symptoms are recurring
- You have pulmonary symptoms
- You have difficulty swallowing
- You are diagnosed with Barrett's esophagus

The golden treatment for severe GER is the use of any of the Proton pump inhibitors such as Aciphex, Nexium, Protonex, Prevacid, and Prilosec. They all do an equally good job, but each of us may tolerate or respond better to one over the other. Trial and error may be necessary in finding the right choice for yourself.

May 2004