



Indigestion

NIH Publication No. 05-4549, December 2004

Indigestion, also known as upset stomach or dyspepsia, is discomfort or a burning feeling in the upper abdomen, often accompanied by nausea, abdominal bloating, belching, and sometimes vomiting. Some people also use the term indigestion to describe the symptom of heartburn (a painful, burning feeling in the chest). Indigestion might be caused by a disease in the digestive tract such as ulcer or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), but for many people, it results from eating too much, eating too quickly, eating high-fat foods, or eating during stressful situations. Smoking, drinking too much alcohol, using medications that irritate the stomach lining, being tired, and having ongoing stress can also cause indigestion or make it worse.

Some people have persistent indigestion that is not related to any of these factors. This type of indigestion—called functional or nonulcer dyspepsia—may be caused by a problem in the muscular squeezing action of the stomach (motility).

To diagnose indigestion, the doctor might perform tests for problems, like ulcers. In the process of diagnosis, a person may have x rays of the stomach and small intestine or undergo endoscopy, in which the doctor uses an instrument to look at the inside of the stomach.

Avoiding the foods and situations that seem to cause indigestion in some cases is the most successful way to treat it. Heartburn caused by acid reflux is usually improved by treatment with antacids, H2-blockers, or proton pump inhibitors. Smokers can help relieve their indigestion by quitting smoking, or at least not smoking right before eating. Exercising with a full stomach may cause indigestion, so scheduling exercise before a meal or at least an hour afterward might help.

To treat indigestion caused by a functional problem in the digestive tract, the doctor may prescribe medicine that affects stomach motility.

Because indigestion can be a sign of, or mimic, a more serious disease, people should see a doctor if they have:

- vomiting, weight loss, or appetite loss
- black tarry stools or blood in vomit
- severe pain in the upper right abdomen
- discomfort unrelated to eating
- indigestion accompanied by shortness of breath, sweating, or pain radiating to the jaw, neck, or arm
- symptoms that persist for more than 2 weeks

Tips to Help Prevent Heartburn

Periodic heartburn is a symptom that many people experience. It is caused by stomach acid flowing back into the esophagus (reflux). If it occurs occasionally just after a meal and less than once per week, it is likely not a cause for concern. Heartburn that occurs more frequently than once a week, becomes more severe, or occurs at night and wakes a person from sleep, may be a sign of a more serious condition, such as gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD, and consultation with a doctor is advised.

Here are some simple tips to help prevent heartburn:

- Watch what you eat and stick with items from the basic food groups: fruits and vegetables, rice, pasta, meats low in fat such as turkey and ham, fish, and breads and cereals
- Don't lie down within 3 hours of eating. That's when acid production is at its peak, so plan early dinners and avoid bedtime snacks.
- Try not to overeat or wear tight clothing. It can increase pressure in the abdomen and cause reflux.
- Eat smaller meals while in an upright, relaxed posture.

Remember, talk to your doctor if you have frequent and persistent heartburn for 2 or more days a week.

Opinions expressed are an author's own and not necessarily those of the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). IFFGD does not guarantee or endorse any product in this publication nor any claim made by an author and disclaims all liability relating thereto.

This article is in no way intended to replace the knowledge or diagnosis of your doctor. We advise seeing a physician whenever a health problem arises requiring an expert's care.

IFFGD is a nonprofit education and research organization. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. For more information, or permission to reprint this article, write to IFFGD, PO Box 170864, Milwaukee, WI 53217-8076. Toll free: 888-964-2001. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org or www.aboutgerd.org.