

What You Call Heartburn May Be Something Else

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Have you ever wondered why a cup of coffee or an after dinner mint make you feel better after you've eaten too much? Why, it's because these things contain ingredients that can relax your esophageal sphincter.

My what??!

The esophageal sphincter is a thick ring of muscle fibers at the entrance of the stomach. When we eat, our food mixes with our saliva, then falls down a 10-inch tube called our esophagus. The esophagus connects our throat to our stomach. There are many long and circular muscle fibers making up the esophagus that contract when food is swallowed. The muscles help propel the food into the stomach and create pressure to drive the food there for digestion. The esophageal sphincter acts as a gate keeper to keep food from back washing, but in 10 percent of Americans, food "refluxes" back into the esophagus every day. One third of healthy people experience symptoms at least once a month and women are affected more than men. Some call it "heartburn," others "acid indigestion." In its most severe form, it's called "gastroesophageal reflux disease."

Symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux disease, besides heartburn or acid indigestion can be one or a combination of the following:

- Regurgitation – stomach contents can actually be brought all the way up into the throat or mouth. If one is sleeping, this can even find the trachea and lungs, causing pneumonia.
- Chest pain – when acid bathes the esophagus, it can cause a spasm that can be confused with heart pain.

If reflux is severe, one can develop unexplained hoarseness, sore throat, gum disease or asthma, all caused by acid damage to the throat, mouth, and lungs.

Reflux becomes a problem when it occurs too often or too long. Although the stomach is adapted to handle acids and digestive juices, the esophagus is more sensitive and does not appreciate the bath of gastric juices when the esophageal sphincter does not keep shut. Besides making one uncomfortable, reflux can start eating away at the esophageal tissue. This can cause inflammation, scarring, and a narrowing of the esophagus tube. Over time, it can also change the normal cells of the esophagus into abnormal cells that can occasionally progress to cancer.

If you experience mild "heartburn" from time to time, there are many things you can try to avoid it. In some people, simply bending over or lying down after a large meal increases the pressure in the stomach enough to cause reflux. Avoid wearing a tight belt or control top pantyhose that can cause discomfort. Weight loss can reduce symptoms by decreasing abdominal pressure. Avoiding food and large meals for at least three hours before bed can help. Elevating the head of the mattress six to eight inches with blocks can relieve nighttime symptoms. Avoiding alcohol consumption and smoking, both of which relax the esophageal sphincter, can help. Some foods may affect you and should be avoided if they cause discomfort.

If your symptoms are severe and constant, you should see your health care provider. In most cases, if life style changes aren't working, over the counter or prescriptive drugs can be very effective.