

GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE (GERD)

Is it your imagination or are the commercials for heartburn and reflux multiplying like rabbits? I've recently seen a statistic that up to 40% of adults suffer from reflux also known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). What is GERD? It is a chronic condition caused by the backflow of acid, bile, enzymes, and food into the esophagus. GERD can be triggered by overeating, certain foods and beverages and lying down when the stomach is still full. It occurs because the valve between the stomach and the lower end of the esophagus – called the lower esophageal sphincter- fails to close properly. It is aggravated by anything which increases pressure in the stomach or decreases pressure in the esophagus. Symptoms can be as mild as minor discomfort to severe chest pain that feels like a heart attack. Common symptoms are heartburn, burning in the throat and an acid taste in the mouth. The danger is that over time, stomach acid can erode or cause ulcers in the lining of the esophagus. When these heal the scar tissue may narrow the esophagus making swallowing food more difficult. There is also a possibility of progression to Barrett's esophagus—severe damage to the esophageal lining which is linked to an increased risk of esophageal cancer.

The stomach exudates can also reach the upper esophagus and trachea, causing or worsening a variety of conditions, such as asthma, chronic cough, sinusitis, pneumonia, and others.

Common treatments are antacids, like Tums or Maalox, H2 blockers such as Zantac and Tagamet or proton pump inhibitors like Prilosec. All of these are aimed at decreasing the amount of stomach acid secreted. The down side of these medications is they interfere with the normal digestion of food and the absorption of vitamins and minerals.

Risk factors:

- Smoking
- Obesity
- Spicy foods

It is important for GERD patients to stop smoking. The nicotine in cigarettes acts as a vasoconstrictor to decrease blood flow to the stomach lining. This increases the risk of stomach and esophageal ulcers, and increases acid production. In essence, if you continue to smoke, you are actively reversing everything you are trying to accomplish by taking GERD medications—in addition to increasing your risk for illnesses such as cancer and heart disease.

d-limonene is an extremely promising natural remedy for managing the symptoms of chronic heartburn and GERD. Derived from the citrus oil contained in orange peel, d-limonene produces fast-acting yet long-lasting relief of the symptoms of gastric distress. In clinical studies, distilled and purified d-limonene

has demonstrated an impressive ability not only to reduce heartburn symptoms, but also to resolve them completely for six months or longer, following a period of treatment as brief as 14 days.

Lifestyle changes recommended to help alleviate GERD include losing weight, avoiding fatty foods, quitting smoking and avoiding all tobacco products, sleeping with the upper portion of the body elevated, avoiding eating within three hours of bedtime, and avoiding consuming large quantities of liquids with meals, eat smaller meals, and limiting aspirin, ibuprofen and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. Digestion is also aided by gentle exercise like a walk around the block (the evening constitutional) after dinner and by maintaining erect posture. Many people with sedentary jobs tend to slouch which increases the pressure on the stomach and the lower esophagus.

Dr. Martens is a family physician specializing in natural medicine and homeopathy in Wheaton. For more information or to make an appointment, call (630) 668-5595.