

## Ask the pharmacist: Tips for managing heartburn

### Q: I often get heartburn after eating spicy food. What is heartburn and GERD?

Heartburn is an uncomfortable but common feeling of burning or warmth in the chest. Although the pain of heartburn is felt in the chest, heartburn has nothing to do with your heart. It is caused by stomach acid.

It is very important to distinguish between pain-like symptoms in the chest due to heartburn and pain due to a heart attack. See the “You could be having a heart attack if...” section of this article for more information on heart attack symptoms.

More than 60 million Americans suffer from heartburn at least once a month.<sup>1</sup> Many pregnant women also report severe heartburn.<sup>2</sup>

Heartburn happens when stomach acid backs up into your esophagus (a tube that connects your throat to your stomach). Before entering the stomach, food must pass through a tight muscle called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), at the lower part of your esophagus. If the LES does not close completely, the lower part of your esophagus can be damaged by stomach acid. When this happens, you get heartburn. Heartburn, also known as acid indigestion, typically occurs 30 to 60 minutes after meals. The pain is worse when lying down, bending forward, or straining to pass stools. The pain can be relieved by standing upright, swallowing saliva or water, or by taking antacids.

For mild or only occasional symptoms, simple lifestyle modifications can be helpful.

- Avoid large meals.
- Avoid caffeine (coffee, teas, some soft drinks).
- Avoid chocolate, peppermint, and fatty or fried foods.
- Avoid foods that damage the esophagus, such as spicy foods; citrus fruits and juices; tomatoes and tomato sauces.

For more tips on controlling heartburn, visit the American Gastroenterological Association website at: <http://www.gastro.org/wmspage.cfm?parm1=848> or contact a Medco Gastrointestinal Pharmacist by calling the number on your prescription drug ID card.

Antacids such as *Maalox*<sup>®</sup>, *Mylanta*<sup>®</sup>, *Tums*<sup>®</sup>, or *Roloids*<sup>®</sup> can also be helpful in some circumstances. Antacids work by neutralizing acid. They should be taken 1 hour after meals or when heartburn symptoms occur. Medications that block the production of stomach acid are available over the counter. Some examples include cimetidine (*Tagamet*<sup>®</sup>), ranitidine (*Zantac*<sup>®</sup>), and famotidine (*Pepcid*<sup>®</sup>). An OTC proton pump inhibitor (PPI), such as omeprazole (*Prilosec*<sup>®</sup>), is also available for use for up to 14 days as the next step in treating heartburn.

If you're taking the blood thinner *Plavix*<sup>®</sup> and a PPI, talk to your doctor. Recent studies, including one by Medco, have suggested that PPIs might influence the effectiveness of *Plavix* for decreasing the risk for major cardiovascular events, such as heart attacks.

Call your doctor if your heartburn continues to bother you despite taking the above steps or if you have heartburn more than three times a week for more than 2 weeks. Frequent heartburn (two or more times a week) may be associated with a more severe problem known as gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD. When GERD is not treated properly, serious complications can occur. A 1999 study reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that patients with chronic, untreated heartburn of many years' duration were at substantially greater risk of developing esophageal cancer.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to recommending lifestyle changes such as the ones mentioned above, your doctor may also prescribe medications to treat GERD. H<sup>2</sup> receptor antagonists (H<sup>2</sup> blockers) and PPIs help reduce stomach acid and work to promote healing.

Also consider calling one of Medco's Gastrointestinal Pharmacists for practical advice on managing your heartburn. Available through your plan's mail-order pharmacy, Medco By Mail, specialist pharmacists can answer your questions about how your medications work with each other, and how to make them work best for you. Available 24/7, Gastrointestinal Pharmacists are specially trained in the use of medications that treat one or more chronic conditions. These pharmacists know how your health plan works. They can also review your prescription claims history and suggest ways you can save money on your prescriptions.

To speak with a Medco Gastrointestinal Pharmacist, call the number on your prescription drug ID card.

### **You could be having a heart attack if...**

It is very important to distinguish between pain-like symptoms in the chest due to heartburn and pain due to a heart attack. You could be having a heart attack if you feel one or more of these symptoms, discomfort in the center of the chest (pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain) that lasts more than a few minutes; discomfort in other areas of the upper body (arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach); shortness of breath; breaking out in a cold sweat; nausea; or lightheadedness.<sup>4</sup>

If you're experiencing these symptoms, call 9-1-1.

### **References**

1. Web MD. Heartburn During Pregnancy. <http://www.webmd.com/heartburn-gerd/guide/heartburn-pregnancy>. Accessed October 28, 2008.

2. American College of Gastroenterology. Why are heartburn and GERD not trivial conditions. <http://www.acg.gi.org/patients/gerd/word.asp>. Accessed October 28, 2008.
3. American Heart Association. Heart Attack, Stroke and Cardiac Arrest Warning Signs. <http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3053>. Accessed November 14, 2008.