



THE PLAIN DEALER

Advice on how to avoid pain of acid indigestion

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Q: It's getting harder for me to tolerate foods I've always enjoyed. Things that never bothered me sometimes cause a bit of discomfort - or sometimes, a whole night of tossing and turning. What do you tell someone like me? I'm not THAT old. - MMG, Shaker Heights

A: Well, MMG, you haven't given me much to go on. It would help to know what kind of foods are bothering you and what symptoms you are having and how often.

I suspect you may be suffering from what is commonly called acid indigestion or heartburn. Heartburn occurs when the valve between the stomach and the esophagus doesn't close properly. This allows acidic stomach contents to leak back into the esophagus, causing a burning sensation. The pain often gets worse when you go to bed, because you are lying flat. Other symptoms include pain in the chest, hoarseness in the morning, dry cough and bad breath.

If you have problems more than twice a week, you may have a serious condition called gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD. GERD is serious because it can lead to ulcers and bleeding, swallowing problems and even cancer. People of all ages can have GERD, but it is more common in older people. Other factors that contribute to GERD are use of alcohol, smoking, being overweight and pregnancy.

The first thing you should do is call your doctor and get a diagnosis. If the problem is heartburn or GERD, there are lifestyle and dietary changes that may help. Some foods aggravate an inflamed esophagus or stimulate gastric acid production. Others weaken the valve that keeps reflux out. Your doctor may also recommend prescription or over-the-counter medications. But don't wait a moment longer. Frequent heartburn can be serious. Besides, I don't think you're that old, either!

Lifestyle changes

to treat GERD

Avoid large, high-fat meals close to bedtime.

Avoid lying down for at least three hours after eating.

Raise the head of the bed 6 to 8 inches by putting blocks under the bedposts (pillows aren't enough.)

If you smoke, stop.

If you are overweight, lose weight.

Wear loose-fitting clothing to prevent pressure on the stomach.

Avoid alcohol, caffeine, fatty foods, chocolate, spearmint and peppermint. These weaken the lower esophageal sphincter, or LES valve.

When your esophagus is inflamed, avoid spicy and acidic foods such as citrus fruits, garlic and onions, and tomato-based foods. You may tolerate these once you are healed.

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of University of Akron. Her column runs every other week. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com

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