

Chapter 1

Picturing Heartburn and Reflux

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting acquainted with heartburn, reflux, and GERD
 - ▶ Understanding what puts the *burn* in heartburn
 - ▶ Exploring treatment options
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This chapter is Numero Uno for a very good reason: It serves as your introduction to heartburn, reflux, and the impressively tongue-twisting gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

If you already know that heartburn, reflux, and GERD are common and painful but treatable, then you can just skip along to Chapter 2, which explains your entire digestive system, from one end to the other, with special emphasis on the parts involved in heartburn, reflux, and GERD.

But if you're not totally sure that you know what these conditions are, how they happen, and what tricks modern medical science has up its collective sleeve to alleviate your discomfort, then stick around for a couple of pages.

You can pick up some facts about heartburn's impact on your life, some new words to describe exactly what you mean when you say, "Gastroesophageal reflux disease," and some basic guidelines on what type of help is out there and where you can go to find it.

Meeting Your Heartburn

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

- ✓ Dinner was yummy. But now, just an hour later, you feel that burning pain in the lower part of your chest — and maybe have a nasty taste in your mouth.

- ✓ You're out for short run, pounding the pavement, when you round the corner and that burning pain makes another appearance.
- ✓ You lie down to sleep, and as you're about to drift off to Dreamland that pain pops back up, right smack in the middle of your chest.

If you didn't hurt so much, you'd probably see this saga as sort of boring and predictable: No matter what you do, no matter where you are, that sudden pain can bring you up short, halt the action, take the wind out of your sails . . . okay, I'm done with the metaphors.

The fact that you bought this book and are thumbing through Chapter 1 tells me that you've already met the pain that most of the world calls heartburn. Now, the time has come to get to know a little more about it.

Saying hello to your fellow sufferers



When you hurt, the natural reaction is to think that you're alone in your misery. But the first fact that you need to know about heartburn is that its pangs are as common as the common cold.

In fact, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) — I have no idea why that abbreviation doesn't read NIDDKD — the incidence of heartburn is positively staggering.

- ✓ More than 60 million American adults have heartburn at least once a month.
- ✓ More than one-third of American women ages 35 to 44 and slightly less than one-third of American men in the same age group have “frequent” heartburn. Translation: More than two incidents a week.
- ✓ At least 25 million Americans have heartburn every day.
- ✓ One in four pregnant women has heartburn daily; a lot of babies whose parents think they have colic actually have heartburn; and as you get older, your risk of heartburn rises — which explains why, later on in this book, you can find a chapter devoted to each of these three “special” groups (Chapters 17, 18, and 19, to be specific).

And don't think Americans have the market cornered when the discussion concerns heartburn:

- ✓ According to a study published in the medical journal *Gut*, up to 20 percent of the people in Great Britain have heartburn at least once a week.

- ✓ According to the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, about
 - 7 percent of all Canadians suffer from heartburn daily.
 - 13 percent of all Canadians suffer from heartburn once a week.
 - 24 percent of all Canadians suffer from heartburn at least once a month.

Quantifying your discomfort

According to a Gallup poll conducted for the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA), a professional organization for doctors who treat digestive disorders,

- ✓ More than 80 percent of people with heartburn say that their condition stops them from enjoying food.
- ✓ More than 60 percent of people with heartburn say that their pain keeps them from getting a good night's sleep.
- ✓ More than 40 percent of people with heartburn say that their pain interferes with their ability to concentrate at work.
- ✓ More than 30 percent of people with heartburn say that their pain gets in the way of enjoying family activities.



In other words, having heartburn is no fun at all. And it's not a matter to take lying down (especially right after you eat, a common invitation to heartburn). As the stats show, heartburn can really affect your quality of life. But you don't have to "just deal with it." Your doctor can help alleviate the discomfort (a topic that I cover in the "Looking for Help in All the Right Places" section later in the chapter).

Pinning the Tail on the Heartburn Donkey

Wine, hot dogs, chocolate, orange juice, hot pepper . . . Why go on? Chances are, you see this list of positively deee-li-cious foods as a red flag emblazoned with the words *Heartburn Ahead!* Ditto for smoking, working out, or being stressed. No surprise there.

The surprise is that although some lifestyle choices, such as avoiding certain foods, eating smaller meals, giving up cigarettes or alcohol, adjusting your exercise regimen, or trying to avoid stressful situations, may relieve your symptoms, heartburn isn't a lifestyle disease.



Actually, that point deserves to be mentioned again: *Heartburn isn't a lifestyle disease*. The pain in your middle is the most common symptom of an honest-to-goodness medical condition called *gastroesophageal reflux disease*, generally abbreviated as GERD.

Defining terms and conditions

Like most medical conditions, GERD has a vocabulary all its own. To be able to talk about heartburn, you need to know a few basic terms.



- ✓ **Esophagus:** This term comes from the Greek words for *to carry* and *to eat*. The *esophagus*, or the throat, is the approximately 8-inch tube that connects the back of your mouth (the *pharynx*) with your stomach.
- ✓ **Lower esophageal sphincter (LES):** The *LES* is a muscular valve between the esophagus and the stomach. When you swallow, the valve opens to let food into the stomach. Then it should close tightly enough to keep acidic stomach contents from flowing backwards into the esophagus.

Because you need to know how the LES works — and malfunctions — to understand heartburn and reflux, and because the *For Dummies* books are designed to let you jump in at any point, this book repeats the LES definition more than once. Feel free to skip it after you have it down pat.

- ✓ **Reflux:** Grammatically speaking, reflux is double-jointed, a word that can be either a noun or a verb. *Reflux*, the noun, is the acidic liquid that sloshes back through the LES into your esophagus. *Reflux*, the verb, is what happens when the LES malfunctions. So you can correctly say, “His LES opened by mistake, allowing reflux to reflux into his esophagus.”

Talking Brit versus Yank

Americans and Britons speak the same basic language. But sometimes they pronounce the same word differently — in the United States, *schedule* is *skedule*; in Britain, it's *shedule*. And they often spell words differently, too. You go to the *theater* in New York, but the play's on stage at the *theatre* in London. Red's a *color* in Chicago, but hop over the Big Pond to Liverpool, and red's a *colour*. In Los Angeles, teachers expect to *civilize* their students; in Manchester, the plan is to *civilise* them.

Medical words aren't immune to these interesting variations. If you're reading this page in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, or any place else where your friends and neighbors speak British English rather than American English, *esophagus* starts with an *o*. In other words, *esophagus* becomes *oesophagus*, and *GERD* morphs into *GORD*. Who else would tell you these things?



✓ **Frequent reflux:** Everyone has an incident of reflux at least once in his life, but some people have reflux a lot more often. Doctors call reflux that occurs more than two or three times a week “frequent reflux.”

✓ **Heartburn:** This is the sharp pain that you feel as soon as reflux flows through the LES to hit the lining of your esophagus.

No, heartburn has nothing to do with your heart. No, it isn't really a burn, as in you touched a lit match and singed your finger. But the sharp pain in the middle of your chest can feel like a burn, or sometimes like the searing pain of a heart attack. In fact, heartburn may so closely mimic the sensation of a heart attack that your doctor may actually have to run special tests to differentiate the two conditions (as Chapter 3 explains). So, heck, if it occurs in the region of your heart and it sometimes feels like a heart problem, why not call heartburn “heartburn”?

✓ **GERD:** GERD is an abbreviation for **gastroesophageal reflux disease**, the most accurate term for the condition characterized by frequent reflux. Because fewer people have GERD than have occasional heartburn or occasional reflux, throughout this book you see the words *heartburn* and *reflux* much more often than you see *GERD*.



Pain isn't the only sign of reflux. You may also have bad breath, a dry cough, and several other symptoms that I describe in Chapter 3. If you're burning with the desire to find out whether your heartburn fits the pattern, bookmark this page and flip ahead to the symptoms checklist in Chapter 3. Then come back for an overview of the ways in which your doctor can help you put out the fire.

Looking for Help in All the Right Places

Sooner or later, as your heartburn continues to burn its way into your life, you will come to the following decision: I need help! Saying these words out loud (or even thinking them) makes you one smart cookie. Acting on them expands your smartness exponentially, a term mathematicians use when they mean “a whole bunch.”

The National Heartburn Alliance (NHBA) is an organization dedicated to publicizing the effects of heartburn and finding ways to relieve your discomfort. Every few years, the alliance does a survey of Americans to find out what's what with heartburn and how they begin to look for help. One recent NHBA survey says that

- ✓ More than half the people with heartburn say that their pain makes it hard for them to enjoy life.
- ✓ 90 percent of the people with frequent heartburn tried to find relief with simple over-the-counter (OTC) remedies.
- ✓ Only 20 percent of heartburn sufferers have gone on to seek serious medical advice and relief.

What in the world is holding back the other 80 percent?



Modern medicine's cup brimmed over with heartburn remedies, so your doctor will have treatment to ease your discomfort. (For more about the doctors who treat heartburn, see Chapters 8 and 9).

Editing the menu

What you eat, when you eat it, and how much you eat aren't the first causes of your reflux-related heartburn. But — and it's a big “but” — these activities can exacerbate your symptoms. As Chapter 6 explains, avoiding foods on your personal heartburn list, eating smaller portions, and never eating right before you lie down to sleep may all make you feel much, much better.



As you fine-tune your menu, avoiding some foods and emphasizing others, be careful to follow a healthful diet that provides all the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients a body needs. For more on how to do that, see Chapter 5.

Looking at your lifestyle

Like food choices, style choices didn't give you heartburn in the first place. But living smart can make you much more comfortable, and I provide you with the strategies to do just that in Chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16 — heck, make that the entire Part IV. For example, savvy fashionistas (and fashionistos) know that when you have GERD, your clothing can matter. Wearing clothes so tight that you have to lie down on the bed to zip them is a no-no because clothes that are tight around your middle put pressure on your stomach, pushing it up against your LES . . . And take my word for it — this isn't a good thing. Ditto for smoking, abusing alcohol, and doing the “wrong” exercises.

Remedying the situation

Have heartburn only once in a while? Some of Granny's home remedies are effective enough for Granny's grandson, the doctor, to endorse them. One example is sodium bicarbonate, or baking soda. Read all about home remedies, including some you should avoid, in Chapter 7.

Managing your meds



A whole medicine cabinet awaits the heartburn sufferer, starting with simple antacids available over the counter, no questions asked, and progressing up the pharmaceutical ladder to prescription-strength products that reduce the amount of acid that your stomach pumps out naturally each day. Faced with this dazzling array of magical meds, you'd be smart to consult with your doctor, who's qualified to guide you through the maze. Before you go, though, check out Chapter 10 to arm yourself with a few basic facts on heartburn meds and Chapter 11 for medications that may make your heartburn worse.

Seeing the surgeon

For a relatively small number of people with heartburn, when no other treatment seems effective, some doctors may suggest heartburn surgery to alter the innards, tightening the LES. You can read about this procedure in Chapter 12, including the fact that some experts say this elective surgery is virtually never warranted.

