

Chapter 1

Saying Goodbye to Reflux: Your Road to a Reflux-Free Lifestyle

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Acid reflux is a common medical condition that affects millions of people around the globe. For some, reflux is a minor inconvenience, but others battle reflux daily. Your reflux may not require anything more than the occasional antacid. Or your fight with reflux could require daily medication, lifestyle changes, and even surgery. Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, acid reflux has an impact.

The battle against reflux isn't always easy. Some days, the struggle may not seem worth the results, but in the long run, eliminating reflux is worth the effort. Not only will you be healthier and reduce your risk for serious medical complications associated with reflux, but you'll also just plain feel better.

What Acid Reflux Is, and Why It's Bad

Acid reflux is a digestive disorder that affects millions of people worldwide. Unlike many diseases or disorders, it doesn't discriminate. It affects all ages, races, ethnicities, and genders equally. Just because your family doesn't have a history of reflux doesn't mean you won't get reflux. Likewise, all your siblings having the condition doesn't mean you'll get it. Reflux also varies significantly in severity and frequency. Regardless of who it affects or how severe it gets, reflux is the result of a malfunctioning digestive system.

Depending on your symptoms, your doctor may diagnose you with acid reflux or gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). The root problem is the same for both of these conditions; it's the severity and frequency that separates the two. Patients who suffer heartburn or other reflux symptoms two or more times a week will usually be diagnosed with GERD. While GERD is usually the more serious condition, both acid reflux and GERD can lead to long-term health consequences.

The main culprit in all acid-reflux cases is the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), a small ring of muscles that connects the esophagus and the stomach. The esophagus is the tube that extends from the mouth to the stomach. This tube carries anything you eat or drink into the stomach. When your LES is working correctly, it functions as a one-way valve, allowing food and fluids to pass into the stomach while blocking any stomach contents from coming back up.

If you have acid reflux or GERD, your LES is malfunctioning. Instead of blocking the stomach's contents, the contents are allowed to travel back up into the esophagus. Because stomach acid is highly corrosive, it doesn't take much to cause discomfort and do some damage. Depending on how severe your reflux is, acid can make it all the way up to the larynx, throat, and mouth. In some cases that fiery fury can even make it into the lungs.

The reason why the LES malfunctions varies from person to person. In some cases, the LES may not close off completely after food or fluid passes through. Because the stomach works like a washing machine on spin cycle when digesting, a partially open LES means churning stomach acid can easily whirl out of the stomach. In other cases, your LES may simply open and close on its own, allowing your stomach's contents to escape. Sometimes the factor is lifestyle or weight; for other people, it's anatomy. Regardless of the root cause, how often and how severely your LES malfunctions will have a tremendous impact on how serious your acid reflux turns out to be.

Several symptoms are associated with acid reflux. The most common symptom is heartburn. Heartburn is so common that many people mistakenly refer to heartburn and acid reflux as the same thing. Heartburn is the burning sensation that results from stomach acid surging into the esophagus. Acid reflux is the condition that allows acid to make it into the esophagus. Although the pain associated with heartburn can be severe — so severe that it's sometimes mistaken for a heart attack — it's usually not a serious medical condition.

Some of the other relatively innocuous symptoms of acid reflux include gas, burping, bloating, regurgitation, and nausea. Although these symptoms may not seem serious, dealing with them on a regular basis can hamper your life.

Reflux is also linked with several serious, life-threatening medical conditions. One of the more serious conditions associated with reflux is *esophageal stricture* (a narrowing of the esophagus), which can make it difficult to swallow and often requires surgery to correct. Even more serious is *Barrett's esophagus*, a mutation of the cells lining the esophagus; this condition can be a precursor to esophageal cancer. No thank you.

It's not just the possible medical complications that make treating reflux or GERD worthwhile. Reflux affects life in so many other ways as well. It affects mood and emotions and sleep. When you're constantly dealing with discomfort or having to worry if your next meal is going to lead to hours of pain, it's hard to live in the moment. When you can't get a good night's sleep because of reflux, it makes each day that much longer and harder to get through. Add the constant stress your body is under from having to repair the physical damage that results from reflux, and it's a recipe for misery. So, even if you don't think your reflux is too bad, go ahead and take the challenge of reducing your reflux, and see how much better you feel.

Revamping Diet and Lifestyle

For some people, diet and lifestyle changes are easy. For you, it might be a long journey that can leave you feeling like you're sacrificing just as much as you're gaining. But keep with it! When your reflux is under control, all the effort will have been worth it. The other big advantage of treating reflux with lifestyle and dietary changes is monetary. Medication or surgery can be extremely expensive, but lifestyle and dietary changes are inexpensive.



Even just a few tweaks to diet can sometimes make a world of difference for your reflux. And diet is often one of the primary triggers for reflux symptoms like heartburn. You can probably name at least one meal that you know spells trouble for your reflux. But figuring out what exactly it is about that meal that's causing the flare-up can be difficult. Is it the ingredients, the sauce, the spices, or even how it's prepared?



Several foods seem to universally affect people's acid reflux and GERD negatively:

- **High-fat foods:** High-fat foods can sit in the stomach longer, which stimulates the body to produce more stomach acid. The more stomach acid you have spinning around in your stomach, the more likely some of it will enter the esophagus. Fatty and greasy foods cause the LES to relax. So, while there's more stomach acid splashing around for a longer period of time, there's also a weakened LES trying to keep your stomach contents where they belong. That's asking a lot of your body.

- ✓ **Spicy foods:** These foods can be troublesome for patients with reflux and GERD. They don't affect everyone as universally as high-fat foods, but it's not uncommon for patients to complain of severe heartburn after an extra spicy or flavorful meal.
- ✓ **Meals with lots of ingredients:** Some dietitians believe that complicated meals with lots of ingredients can be difficult to digest. Meals like these sit in the stomach longer, which can give your reflux an extended period of time to strike.
- ✓ **Highly acidic foods:** Even if they don't actually cause reflux, highly acidic foods can increase the pain and damage done to an already inflamed and irritated esophagus and throat.
- ✓ **Processed foods:** Staying away from processed foods is a good idea. Some dietitians believe that the body has to work harder to break down processed foods. Just like fatty foods, this may mean more gastric acid and a longer digestion period — prime reflux conditions. The longer food remains in the stomach, the more gastric acid is stimulated, and that longer timeframe presents more opportunities for gastric contents to regurgitate up the esophagus. Foods that are hard to mechanically digest, or grind up in the stomach, hang out longer.

It turns out when and how much you eat can have just as much of an impact on your reflux as what you eat. Most people are used to the traditional three daily meals with dinner being the largest. Although this may be tradition, it spells trouble for reflux. Eating only three meals a day (instead of smaller, more frequent meals) makes you more likely to overindulge at any given meal. Even if you don't overindulge, the meals are probably bigger than they'd be if you ate five meals a day. When you eat a large meal, it forces your stomach to stretch out. This puts more pressure on the LES, increasing the likelihood that it will fail and some stomach acid will escape. This is why binge eating is never a good idea, especially for people with reflux or GERD.



Instead of the traditional three large meals, try switching to five smaller meals. This will keep you from getting hungry and will put less stress on your stomach and LES. You should also try to eat your largest meal of the day for breakfast and keep your dinner relatively small. You'll have more energy during the day and your body won't be processing food at night. Because heartburn and reflux are usually worse at night, eating a smaller meal means quicker digestion and less opportunity for reflux. You should also wait at least two or three hours before lying down after a meal. The more time you give your body to digest before going to sleep, the lower the chance for heartburn.

By far the most important component in most people's battle with reflux is weight. While the exact reason or mechanism that excess weight causes or triggers reflux isn't known, researchers suspect that extra weight stresses the digestive system. Excess weight, especially abdominal weight, increases the

amount of pressure on the stomach, which makes it possible for the stomach's contents to be pushed into the esophagus. Studies have also found that excess fat can impair the body's ability to empty the stomach quickly. The longer food sits, the more opportunity reflux has to strike.

Losing even a few pounds may be all you need to do in order to reduce or even eliminate reflux from your life completely. In fact, several studies have found that weight loss can be the most effective method of treatment for both acid reflux and GERD. And you don't even have to be very overweight for weight to play a factor. Research has shown that even for patients within their proper body mass index (BMI), the loss of a few pounds had significant impact on their reflux. A recent study of women found that losing weight reduced their risk for heartburn up to 40 percent.



To find your BMI, go to www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/BMI/bmicalc.htm. You just enter your height and weight, and you find your BMI.

Losing weight with reflux isn't just about working out. In fact, some types of workouts exacerbate reflux. Physicians usually recommend avoiding high-impact workouts, such as running. You'll also want to avoid exercises that increase the pressure on your stomach, such as crunches. Instead, try going hiking or walking. Low-impact exercise routines will still get those endorphins going and calories burning, without adding stress to the LES. Couple your workout with a balanced meal plan, and you'll be well on your way to dropping a few pounds and giving acid reflux the boot.

Habits like smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol, or consuming large amounts of caffeine can also affect reflux or GERD. Often these are the hardest habits for people to kick, because many of these items are stimulants with addictive qualities. Stop drinking caffeine out of the blue, and you're bound to experience headaches. Stop cigarettes cold turkey, and you're going to have a few miserable weeks ahead of you.

Tobacco use, no matter what type, has been linked to acid reflux and GERD. Studies have shown that tobacco inhibits saliva production. That's bad, because saliva plays a critical role in the digestion process. Saliva helps break down food and it also clears out food or acid from the esophagus. Less saliva means less efficient digestion. Tobacco also increases stomach acid production. This means there's more acid available to cause damage during a bout of reflux. On top of that, tobacco smoke can irritate an already sore esophagus, throat, and lungs.

Caffeine is another type of stimulant that can affect reflux. The good news for caffeine lovers is that it's usually overconsumption of caffeine that's the problem. For most people, one or two cups of coffee in a day isn't going to have a tremendous impact on their reflux. But putting down cup after cup throughout the day can spell problems.



The scientific community continues to waffle on the association between caffeinated coffee and reflux. A recent 2014 *meta-analysis* (a pooling together of 15 separate studies to try to come to a statistically significant conclusion) found “no significant association between coffee intake and GERD.” However, other studies demonstrate that caffeine hurts the performance of the LES. To make it even more unclear to coffee lovers, darker roasts, which contain higher concentrations of chemicals such as N-methylpyridinium (which is produced by roasting the beans) have been shown to stimulate less gastric acid secretion than their lighter-roasted brethren, even with the same caffeine content. Confusing, right?

Bottom line: It’s up to you and your body. If your light-roast, fully caffeinated coffee causes chest burning, perhaps consider a dark-roasted decaffeinated brew, or no coffee at all.

Another type of beverage to monitor: soda. Not only do many sodas contain caffeine, but the carbonic acid itself and carbonation can cause gas and bloating, symptoms that can intensify reflux.

Finally, your doctor will probably want to examine how much alcohol you consume. Any form of alcohol can be a nuisance for reflux. For instance, high-proof liquors interfere with the clearing of acid from the esophagus, especially when the subject is lying down. Basically, the high-proof alcohol slows down the esophageal muscles and the acid sits in the esophagus after it spurts up from the stomach. This means any corrosive acid that has managed to make it into the esophagus will have more time to damage your esophageal lining, making it more likely that you’ll develop complications like esophageal strictures or even Barrett’s esophagus.

Interestingly, while studies have found that alcohol can worsen reflux, they’ve also found that cutting back doesn’t necessarily have a significant impact on reducing reflux. But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth the effort. Reducing alcohol may not cure your reflux, but continuing to consume it can certainly make reflux worse.

Cooking Your Way to Less Reflux

One way you can take control over your battle with acid reflux is to begin cooking your meals at home. We all know how easy it is to just grab a quick bite from a restaurant after work or between picking up the kids at school and dropping them off at basketball practice. However, taking the extra time to prepare meals at home may be worth the effort. If you need to eat out, follow the guidelines in Chapter 15.

Different foods affect people in different ways. Garlic may not bother you, but tomato sauce may be your kryptonite. So, part of the battle will be paying attention to what specific foods trigger your reflux. If you notice you get bad heartburn every time you eat an orange, it's a pretty good sign that you should avoid that food. In general, you should avoid foods that contain tomatoes, citrus, chocolate, and mint. Try to avoid cooking meals that use these particular ingredients, or figure out a substitute for the problem ingredient.

Another key is trying to make lighter, lower-fat meals. One easy way to do this is to bake or steam your food instead of frying or sautéing it. It's a quick and easy way to cut some of the fat from your meal and make it easier for your body to digest. Also try substituting lowfat yogurt for cream. Small recipe tweaks like that can go a long way in your fight against reflux. Cutting back on your meat portions and increasing your vegetable servings can also be helpful. Meats, especially those high in fat, take longer to empty from your stomach, which can be a problem for reflux sufferers. Finally, include as many whole grains in your diet as possible (as long as you don't have an allergy). Whole grains are filling and nutritious.

Drinking water with or right after your meal can also be a good way to reduce reflux symptoms, especially heartburn. Water will help flush stomach acid or food out of your esophagus and back down into your stomach. On top of that, water can dilute any acid trapped in the esophagus. The more diluted acid is, the less damage it can do. Although water can be helpful, you should avoid drinking carbonated water. Carbonated water can increase the pressure inside the stomach which can make the LES malfunction.

Just as there are foods you should avoid because they can trigger reflux, there are also foods that can reduce your risk for reflux. Oatmeal is always a good choice. Not only is it healthy in general, but it's also a lowfat, high-fiber meal that can help soothe the stomach. Ginger is another great ingredient for people with reflux. It has anti-inflammatory qualities and is often used to treat digestive and gastrointestinal issues, such as reflux. According to some dietitians, fruits like bananas and melons are often tolerated well by people who suffer from reflux.



In a small percentage of patients, bananas and melons can actually make reflux worse. Generally, you should look for fruits with a higher pH and avoid acidic fruits like oranges or lemons.

Try to incorporate as many greens and roots into your diet as possible. Vegetables like cauliflower, broccoli, asparagus, and green beans are all very nutritious and won't contribute to your reflux or GERD, unless you deep-fry them. Fennel can be another great food in the battle against reflux. Studies have shown that it helps to soothe the stomach while improving its function and efficiency. Slice it thin and add it to a salad or a chicken dish for a quick,

healthy, heartburn-free meal. And don't be afraid of eating a few complex carbohydrates, such as brown rice. They'll give you fiber and energy and won't cause problems for your reflux.

The other thing you'll want to pay attention to is your choice of protein. Instead of eating high-fat meats, including most red meats, try switching over to leaner choices like chicken or turkey. Sometimes just switching to a leaner meat can be all it takes to reduce raging reflux to a manageable condition. The good thing about lean meats is that you can cook them in a variety of ways to keep from getting bored with the same meal day-in and day-out. Go ahead and bake, broil, grill, or sauté your poultry, but be sure to remove the skin because it's high in fat. Also, try incorporating more fish and seafood into your diet. Most types of fish are great lowfat choices.

Tackling Special Situations

A wide variety of special circumstances can influence a treatment plan for acid reflux and GERD. Some of the more common groups — such as pregnant women, kids, and the elderly — are covered in Chapter 16. But there are other unique situations that can affect your treatment, too.

One special case is acid reflux caused by a *hiatal hernia* (a condition in which a small section of the stomach gets pushed up into a hole in the diaphragm). Smaller hernias probably won't cause many noticeable symptoms; however, a larger hernia can cause food and stomach acid to get trapped in the esophagus, causing severe reflux and discomfort. In most cases, doctors may have to do some procedures (such as an upper endoscopy, esophageal pH test, or esophageal manometry) to verify if the hiatal hernia is the cause of the reflux. When your doctor has determined the cause, he'll map out a treatment plan.

There are a variety of treatments for hiatal hernias depending on the specifics of your condition. In some cases, the doctor may prescribe over-the-counter antacids or even prescription acid reflux medication. Treatment will also usually require you to adjust eating and sleeping schedules. It'll be important for you to eat several small meals a day — try to minimize the amount of food you eat at any one time. This will help reduce the likelihood that your reflux or GERD will flare up. You'll also want to avoid lying down for at least three hours after eating or drinking. In some cases, your doctor will recommend surgery to correct the problem. It's usually a laparoscopic procedure with a recovery time between five and ten days.

Treating your reflux or GERD while combating an ulcer is another special situation. For patients with both reflux and ulcers, the pain can be excruciating. Reflux symptoms tend to manifest in the upper chest, but ulcer pain usually falls between the sternum and navel. If you have a bad case of both, you could experience pain and discomfort in your whole chest and abdomen.

If your doctor determines that your ulcer has been caused by a bacteria living in the mucous coating your stomach (*Helicobacter pylori*), he'll treat the bacteria with strong antacid medications and antibiotics for 7 to 14 days. Successful treatment of *H. pylori* usually means that the recovered stomach lining then secretes even more acid, making your reflux symptoms worse, at least temporarily. After the *H. pylori* has been cleared, you may need lifelong antacid medication to manage the reflux.

Even generally innocuous over-the-counter medications like aspirin have been known to cause reflux flare-ups. Other medications that have been routinely linked to reflux and GERD include, antibiotics, steroids, antihistamines, heart medications, osteoporosis medications, chemotherapy drugs, pain medications, and even potassium and iron supplements.

Talk openly with your doctor and pharmacist about your reflux symptoms. It's a good idea to get all your medications through the same pharmacist so she can check for any drug interactions. The pharmacist may also be able to find a comparable medication that won't impact your reflux. And don't be afraid to try some of the usual remedies for reflux, such as a nice ginger tea or other stomach soothers.

