Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

Patient Information

Acid Reflux

Gastroenterology

Acid Reflux is a condition where the contents of the stomach repeat backwards up into the gullet. It is very common, and while the symptoms can be uncomfortable it is almost never a sign of serious illness. Nearly all of us get acid reflux from time to time, and 20% of the general population take medication bought at the chemist for acid reflux at least once a week.

There are many reasons why people get acid reflux. Often there is a weakness at the lower end of the gullet because part of the upper stomach exits the abdomen through the diaphragm and enters the lower chest (hiatus hernia). This phenomenon is commoner in people who are overweight. Sometimes reflux is with more than just acid – there may be bile or partly digested foodstuffs.

As you know from your experience, symptoms can include the following: -

- **heartburn**
- **excessive wind**
- **sudden surge of stomach contents into the food pipe causing burning sensation in the chest or even into the mouth with bitter tasting fluid.**

Symptoms of reflux can flare up and settle down over time. It is possible to reduce the need for repeat prescriptions of strong medicines to treat your symptoms. This will mean that they can be used only when really necessary. Many patients are able to learn how to manage these symptoms without using medicines to help.

The GP or Practice Nurse can advise you if you have any questions about your medicines.

You can make changes in your lifestyle habits which can help to reduce the frequency and severity of your troublesome symptoms.

Smoking

This relaxes the muscle at the entrance to your stomach and allows stomach contents to repeat backwards up the gullet. We know how hard it can be to give up smoking. But when you're ready to stop you don't have to go it alone. Stop Smoking Wales offers free, friendly, local NHS support that really works. Stop Smoking Wales will help you plan and prepare for your quit date and provide ongoing help and advice. Contact Stop Smoking Wales on (free phone) 0800 085 2219.

Weight

If you are overweight (you can check this with your doctor, practice nurse or dietician, who will be able to give you dietary advice) try to reduce it. Ideally this should be a combination of a reduced calorie intake and increased physical exercise.

Lowering your weight helps to reduce pressure on your stomach and prevent its contents escaping upward into the food pipe.

Eating

This can be divided into: -

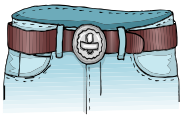
1. Eating pattern – try to eat regularly, slowly, avoid eating large meals. Eating quickly lets air into your stomach and causes wind. Large meals increase pressure on the stomach. (Try not to eat large meals within a few hours of bedtime)

2. Types of food – some foods slow down the emptying of the stomach and so aggravate reflux. Try to restrict or avoid the following: -

   - ✓ very hot or fizzy drinks
   - ✓ spicy food like chilli or curry
   - ✓ foods like onions, citrus fruits and pepper.
   - ✓ fatty food like full fat cheese, heavy pastry or cakes or cream
   - ✓ caffeine in tea, coffee, cola or chocolate – it increases acid levels and aggravates heartburn and acid reflux.

Posture
Poor posture can worsen symptoms, so try the following: -

- ✓ eat sitting upright
- ✓ avoid bending or stooping particularly after food. If you have to reach down, try kneeling instead
- ✓ wear looser clothing around the stomach, avoiding tight waist bands, belts or control underwear.
- ✓ at night you may find it useful to sleep in a more upright position, by either using extra pillows or a wedge-shaped support under your head and shoulders or raising the head of the bed, with proper bed blocks placed under the legs. This can help food to stay in the stomach. Just using extra pillows will not suffice, because your chest and abdomen will remain fully reclined.



If your symptoms change or worsen, particularly if you should have any new and persisting stomach problems, please do not hesitate to talk to your doctor or your practice nurse.

Remember medicine can only help to an extent in this common problem. Making positive changes to your lifestyle is also important.

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"This document is available in Welsh /
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