



Catholic Healthcare West

Ask the Expert
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Q: What is the difference between acid reflux and heart burn?

A: Acid reflux, also known as gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD, occurs when the lower esophageal sphincter (or valve) at the entrance of the stomach doesn't close or opens inappropriately. When the valve doesn't close, stomach acid refluxes into your esophagus causing acid damage to the lining.

Heartburn is one of the most common symptoms of acid reflux and is characterized by a pain or burning in your stomach, chest or throat. Other symptoms of acid reflux may include regurgitation, nausea, bloating and burping or hiccups that won't stop. Sometime persistent cough or throat clearing may be a symptom of acid reflux.

People of all ages can experience acid reflux, and is also a common in pregnant women because the baby pushes against the stomach and diaphragm. Other causes for acid reflux include being overweight, eating before laying down, consuming large portions, drinking caffeine or alcohol, smoking and eating fatty foods. Spicy and acidic foods may worsen acid reflux symptoms.

If you experience heartburn, try to determine what is causing it. Healthy diet and exercise may help. If you experience heartburn at night, eating at least 4 hour before going to bed and propping your head and chest on a pillow can help alleviate some discomfort. You can also try taking an over-the-counter antacid to help reduce the amount of acid in your stomach.

Heartburn or acid reflux can be serious and can lead to Barrett esophagus and esophageal cancer. It's important to talk to your doctor if you suffer from heartburn two or more times a week. He or she may want to give you a prescription or perform endoscopy to check for Barrett esophagus.

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