

Acid Reflux

Acid Reflux: A Common Throat Irritant

Do you clear your throat or cough often? Are you hoarse? Do you have trouble swallowing? If you have these or other throat symptoms, acid reflux (when stomach acid washes up into the throat) may be the problem. For the most people, acid reflux is troubling but not dangerous. However, left untreated, acid reflux sometimes damages the esophagus. It can even lead to serious problems, including cancer.

Throat Symptoms

Throat symptoms can be felt at any time, but are often noticed most when lying down. You may have acid reflux if you have one or more of the symptoms below:

- Frequent need to clear your throat
- Feeling like you're choking
- Chronic cough
- Hoarseness
- Trouble swallowing
- Sensation of having "a lump in the throat"
- Sour or acid taste
- Recurrent sore throat

Steps You Can Take

You can ease your symptoms by making some simple diet and lifestyle changes. If needed, your doctor will also suggest medications that may help.

Why You Have Throat Symptoms

At both ends of the esophagus (the tube that carries food to the stomach) are the esophageal sphincters. These muscles relax to let food pass, then tighten to keep stomach acid down. When the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) doesn't tighten enough, acid can reflux from the stomach into the esophagus. This may or may not cause heartburn. If the upper esophageal sphincter (UES) also doesn't work well, acid can travel higher and enter your throat (pharynx). In the many cases, this causes throat symptoms.

How Reflux Affects Your Throat

The Larynx- also known as the voice box. The larynx produces sound and used for speaking. It is also involved in swallowing.

The Pharynx- also known as the throat. The pharynx connects the mouth to the larynx and the esophagus.

A Weak Upper Esophageal Sphincter- This allows stomach acid to move up into the throat. When this happens, your larynx and pharynx can be injured.

A Weak Lower Esophageal Sphincter- This allows stomach acid to move up into the esophagus. This may cause the upper sphincter to constrict. If this happens, you may feel as if you have a lump in your throat.

Diet and Lifestyle Changes

To control acid reflux, you'll need to make some basic diet and lifestyle changes. The simple steps outlined below may be all you'll need to relieve discomfort.

Watch What You Eat- Changing your eating habits may help reduce stomach acid. Try these tips:

- Avoid fatty foods and spicy foods.
- Eat fewer acidic foods, such as citrus and tomato-based foods. These can increase symptoms.
- Limit alcohol, caffeine, and fizzy beverages. Drinking any of these increases acid reflux.
- Try limiting chocolate.

Watch When You Eat- When you eat is also important. To reduce symptoms:

- Try eating smaller amounts more often. This is easier to digest than 3 big meals.
- Avoid eating for 3 or 4 hours before you lie down.
- Don't snack after dinner.

Raise Your Head When Lying Down- Ask your doctor about raising your head and upper body by 6 to 8 inches when lying down. This sometimes helps limit reflux while you rest. Place a foam wedge under the head of your mattress. Or, put blocks under the head of the bed frame to raise it.

Other Changes- Here are some other ways to help control acid reflux:

- Lose any extra weight.
- Don't work out near bedtime.
- Avoid tight-fitting clothes, such as pants or pantyhose with tight waistbands.
- Limit aspirin and ibuprofen. They may increase stomach irritation.
- Don't smoke.

Medication for Acid Reflux

Along with diet and lifestyle changes, your doctor may prescribe medication to help treat your acid reflux. Medication will be based on your symptoms and the results of any tests.

Other Considerations

Sometimes another condition, such as pregnancy, can increase symptoms of acid reflux. Or if symptoms do not respond to medication, further tests or treatment may be needed. To pinpoint the cause of your symptoms and to rule out more serious health problems, you may be referred to another type of doctor or for further testing.