

Your Health Reference Sheet

Topic: GERD (Acid Reflux)

By Carol Ritberger, PhD, Medical Intuitive

GERD or gastroesophageal reflux disease is frequently referred to as acid reflux or more commonly as heartburn. However, it has nothing to do with the heart. It's just the proximity of where the major discomfort is felt. Over 40 percent of the people in the United States suffer from GERD, and of those, many complain of daily bouts of acid reflux. Occasional GERD isn't harmful, but chronic GERD can indicate more serious problems. People who suffer from acid reflux are far more likely to develop cancer of the esophagus, so eliminating it is important.

General Description:

The esophagus is the muscular, mucous membrane-lined tube, about 10 inches long, that connects the mouth to the stomach. Normally, wave-like contractions move food from the throat down the esophagus and into the stomach. At the upper and lower ends of the esophagus are ring-shaped muscles called sphincters. During swallowing, the sphincters relax and open so that food can pass through the esophagus to the stomach. When the esophagus isn't in use, the sphincters contract, preventing food and stomach acid from flowing *upwards* from the stomach into the mouth. GERD occurs when the sphincter at the bottom of the esophagus weakens or relaxes more often than it should or relaxes at inappropriate times. The discomfort of GERD is caused by a backflow of stomach acid, bile, pepsin, and undigested liquids containing semisolid particles into the esophagus.

The acids and enzymes produced by the stomach are designed to break down or digest foods, but they can also break down some of the body's tissues. The stomach has a lining that protects it, but the esophagus does not. The damage this backflow causes is inflammation, bulges, and even scarring of the esophagus, as well as an increased risk of esophageal cancer.

There is a serious misconception about esophageal reflux that, if not understood, can contribute to other problems. It's the misconception that GERD occurs because of too much stomach acid. In fact, it's just the opposite. There is actually a deficiency in stomach acid, so the use of antacids compounds the problem because it reduces the amount of stomach acid even more.

GERD and Aging:

As a person ages, the ability to digest food changes. The esophagus narrows so the food doesn't always move from the mouth to the stomach as expected. When this occurs, food will sometimes get stuck causing the esophagus to spasm. This narrowing may also cause abnormal pouches and bulges to form in the esophagus, preventing food from moving smoothly. Then there is the problem