

Six Things Employees Should Know about Heartburn – Part 1

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To anyone who has experienced it, heartburn -- also known as indigestion or acid reflux — seems to be a part of the human condition. Likely a third of the American adult population experience this condition at least once a month.

Rather than suffer through an episode or repeat episodes, many of us reach for a remedy. That remedy ranges from an occasional chewable Tums or Rolaids to daily dosages of Proton Pump Inhibitor (PPI) drugs, like Nexium, Prevacid or Prilosec. These options reliably relieve most people's symptoms without immediate side effects, so few question either the need or the remedy.

And yet it turns out both should be questioned. Simple lifestyle changes can reduce the need, and nobody should be taking any drug designed as a remedy every day. Most drugs intended to be taken intermittently or for short periods of time are not labeled, tested or safe for long-term use.

1. Some of the causes of heartburn can easily be addressed

Overeating, eating without an accompanying beverage, eating too fast, eating too late at night – all these things can cause indigestion. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/8-ways-to-quell-the-fire-of-heartburn>

Other less obvious physical causes include:

- Eating while slouching
- Not loosening your belt while filling your stomach
- Too much alcohol, caffeine, or even peppermint, carbonated beverages or chocolate
- Fatty or greasy foods
- Exercising right after eating

Simply addressing these items – particularly in combination and particularly before bed -- could go a long way towards relieving symptoms.

2. Three simple remedies are overlooked

First, try chewing sugarless gum after eating. This stimulates saliva production. You'll often feel a satisfying burp as a result.

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Next, probiotics found naturally in some yogurts (or kombucha) can solve many people's indigestion if consumed regularly for two weeks or so.

There are hundreds of yogurts on the market, so how can you tell if a yogurt has probiotics? Rule of thumb: if you recognize the brand from your childhood, it doesn't. There are also many types of probiotics. None fit everyone's needs exactly, so varying your yogurt choices might be a good idea.

Caution: like every other nutritional supplement, probiotics should not become an obsession. Get them from natural sources rather than pills or other concentrated sources.

Finally, if you have nighttime indigestion, try elevating the head of your bed to create a slight downward plane. Not just adding pillows (see comment above about not scrunching your stomach), but rather inclining your entire bed -- using books, or wedges available online or in any medical supply store. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/gastroesophageal-reflux-disease>

While you're sleeping, this small angle helps keep digestive juices out of your esophagus -- which is specifically the body part that "acid reflux" irritates, as the next section describes.

3. Stomach acid is your friend

Stomach acid is a finely tuned biological tool for turning food into absorbable nutrition. If you try to reduce the natural acidity too much, you could be setting yourself up for a range of complications. This includes complications that you or your doctor may not realize are connected to your stomach acid issues. The key is not to squelch stomach acid, but to keep it in your stomach digesting your food, rather than in your throat/esophagus where it can burn and cause pain.

Sometimes heartburn and ulcers are caused by other drugs you might be taking, such as over-the-counter pain relievers like ibuprofen or acetaminophen. A wide range of drugs cause heartburn, as it turns out.



Tips to relieve heartburn caused by drugs include:

- Reduce or stop those drugs that could be causing your heartburn. If they are prescribed drugs, check with your doctor first.
- Drink more water when you take these medicines.
- Many medicines are supposed to be taken with food. For prescribed drugs, this is labeled clearly. For over-the-counter drugs, you might have to read the label carefully. If there is no indication one way or the other, take pills with food or lots of water.
- Try over the counter drugs such as Tums, Maalox or Pepcid, which can relieve the pain associated with heartburn. All have been on the market for decades with no harms associated with regular (not obsessive!) use.

There is also a chance your heartburn is caused by a bacterium known as *Helicobacter pylori* (H-pylori). You can be tested for this, and your doctor could then prescribe combinations of antibiotics and other heartburn drugs to eliminate H-pylori. However, a huge percentage of us live quite peacefully with H. pylori in our stomachs (and some argue that it is beneficial), so it may not be the cause of your problems. Further, the remedy – powerful antibiotics – might cause more problems than it solves. Just be aware that it's a possibility, and double-check with your doctor.

Stay tuned for Part 2 coming out next month.

