

# Six Things Employees Should Know about Heartburn – Part 2

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The best and safest way to prevent and control your heartburn is through altering your diet and lifestyle. This was outlined in the previous installment of Six Things Employees Should Know about Heartburn, last month. In this installment, we cover remedies, specifically the most popular remedy, the Proton Pump Inhibitor (PPI).

If you choose to seek long-term control, this newest and most popular class of drug can be a blessing and a curse.

The blessing is that PPIs, like Nexium, Prevacid, Prilosec and Protonix, are very effective drugs specifically because they powerfully inhibit the secretion of stomach acid. The curse is that they work so well and with so few noticeable short-term side effects, you may never want to discontinue them.

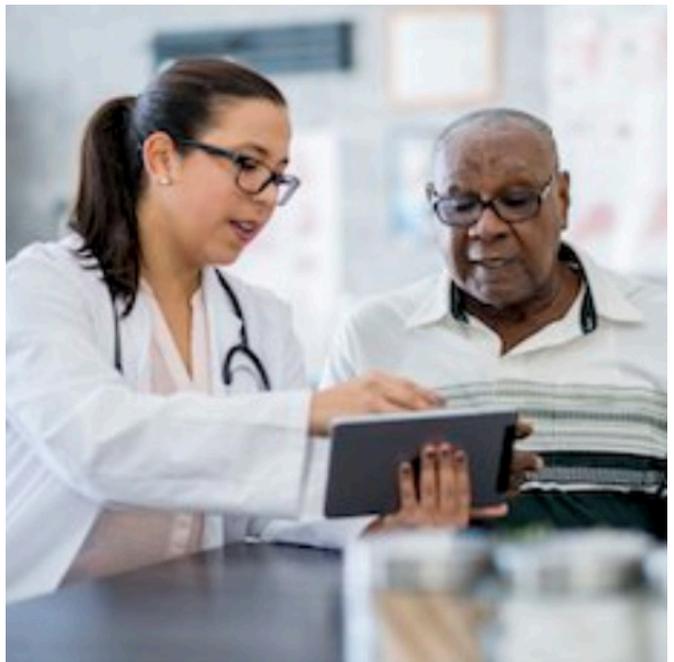
Now that studies are beginning to show that PPIs could cause some long-term problems, it may be a good time to ask if this is the safest and best option for treating your symptoms. Occasional reflux can be treated effectively with the old-fashioned antacids. Some people find that only certain foods (chocolate, coffee, fatty food) trigger GERD-related heartburn, so they learn to avoid them. A chewing gum habit increases the production of saliva that can soothe an irritated esophagus and wash stomach acid back down into the stomach. And if the problem is nighttime heartburn, elevating the head of the bed can help.

This leads us to the 4th thing you should know about heartburn. (The first three were covered in the previous issue.)

## PPIs should be the last choice for treatment of heartburn, not the first choice – and even then, only for the short term.

Your doctor may not always discuss dietary modifications with you, or recommend the generic over-the-counter versions of safer but perhaps less effective remedies. Incidentally, these options are also quite a bit cheaper. You may want to inquire with your doctor.

Why are doctors jumping right to PPIs for their patients with occasional acid reflux? It may be partly due to their effectiveness or because some PPIs such as Nexium have been so heavily marketed, patients are actually asking their doctors for that appealing “little purple pill”. This becomes a quick way to appease patient demands, while offering an effective short-term remedy to relieve symptoms.



With this in mind, be sure to:

- Ask about effective non-drug or over-the-counter drug options to control your heartburn.
- Ask about the potential long-term harms of PPIs.
- If PPI's are prescribed, ask about an end date. If you have simple heartburn and are started on a PPI, it should never be for more than 8 weeks. After such time you should be reassessed, or reduce the use of your PPI to an “as needed” intermittent basis.

This last point brings us to the fifth of the six things.

## You could be harmed by PPIs, if you take them for too long.

Long-term use of PPIs can cause many things, including dependence. PPIs, if taken over months or years can cause you to become so dependent on them that quitting could be extremely difficult. There's even a name for this: “rebound acid hypersecretion,” where you've altered the pH in your stomach enough so that it becomes very unhappy without a PPI.

In addition to this, there are other downsides associated with long-term use. Since 2010, the FDA has issued safety warnings about the possible adverse effects of PPIs taken for years or even many months:

- Vitamin B12 deficiency
- Magnesium deficiency
- Diarrhea
- Thinning bones and fractures
- Kidney problems
- Heart attacks

The risk to you of any single one of these complications is very minor. Taken as a whole

though, it is somewhat concerning that PPIs are even available over-the-counter, particularly when the more traditional remedies are considered safer and for most people virtually as effective.

Keep in mind, PPIs are indeed labeled for short-term use. **Just be sure to actually read the label before use.**

People who need heavy-duty stomach acid suppression should still take a PPI but, working with your doctor, be sure that you're one of them before getting into a long-term relationship with this medication.

## You could be a candidate for deprescribing.

Concerns over long-term use of PPIs have grown so strong that agencies around the world are suggesting that people consider being "deprescribed" PPIs.

The Canadian Association of Gastroenterology (CAG) is one of those international groups that recommends that "PPI therapy for gastrointestinal symptoms should not be maintained long-term without an attempt to stop/reduce them at least once per year in most patients."

The American Gastroenterological Society has warned that patients with simple heartburn should be given the "lowest effective dose needed to achieve therapeutic goals." In other words, if you must take a PPI, go low, go slow, and constantly reassess whether you need it.

## Tips to relieve heartburn caused by drugs.

1. Stop or reduce those drugs that could be causing your heartburn. (If it is a prescribed drug check with your doctor first.)
2. Drink more water when you take these medicines.
3. Take the medicine with food. For prescribed drugs, this is labeled clearly. If there is no indication one way or the other, taking pills with food or lots of water is likely your best bet.
4. Try over-the-counter alternatives which can relieve the pain associated with heartburn. You can discuss alternatives with your doctor.

We hope this two-part series was helpful. A large number of us are affected by heartburn, and possibly by heartburn pills. Some simple education can help a great deal.

