

Indigestion and heartburn

Indigestion is a symptom of disorder of the upper part of the digestive system. Heartburn is a form of indigestion.

You may feel discomfort in the stomach or chest area, heartburn, a tendency to burping, nausea or a sense of bloating and fullness. A common feature of indigestion is swallowing lots of air. Heartburn is felt as a painful tightening or burning feeling in the chest that may swallowing painful. You may have the sensation of acid or stomach contents in the back of the throat or mouth. People who get very painful heartburn sometimes think they are having a heart attack. Severe heartburn should be checked out by a doctor to ensure it is not symptom of a more serious condition.

Heartburn occurs because some of the acid in the stomach is forced back up the gullet (oesophagus). This irritates the gullet and causes soreness and pain.

Indigestion and heartburn are linked to eating habits and posture.

Most cases of indigestion are caused by eating too fast, not chewing food properly or a lot of fatty food in the diet. Smoking and stress can make the symptoms worse. Some medicines, such as anti-inflammatory drugs, may cause indigestion.

Heartburn usually happens after a meal. It is affected by the amount and type of food that you eat, as well as the time at which you eat. Triggers may include the following:

- Fatty food – this is more difficult to digest and stays in the stomach for longer. Stomach acid has more chance to move back up into the gullet.
- Foods such as peppermint, spearmint and chocolate foods – these cause the valve between the gullet and stomach to loosen or relax allowing stomach acid to ‘leak’ up into the gullet.
- Caffeinated drinks (coffee, tea and colas), citrus fruit juices and alcohol – these increase the level of acidity in the stomach.
- Citrus fruit juices, spicy foods and tomato products – these can directly irritate the gullet.
- Being overweight – this puts more pressure on the abdomen and the valve in the gullet.
- Eating large meals – the stomach has to produce a large amount of acid in one go to break down the food and more stomach acid increases the chance of some of it being forced into the gullet.
- Eating before bedtime – stomach acid levels are high after a meal, and certain positions, such as lying down, make it easier for stomach acid to ‘leak’ up into the gullet.
- Pregnancy – as a woman’s body makes room for the baby, organs such as the stomach are pushed upwards. This increases the pressure on the valve in the gullet and may make it more ‘leaky’.
- Smoking – can increase stomach acid production and cause the valve in the gullet to relax and become more ‘leaky’. It also slows down saliva production, which protects the gullet.

Most cases of indigestion and heartburn can be avoided if you:

- Eat smaller meals, instead of one or two large meals each day.

- Avoid highly spiced foods, fatty foods, citrus fruit juices, spirits such as whiskey and brandy and very hot drinks.
- Eat more slowly and sit up straight when eating.
- Try to eat at least 2 or 3 hours before you go to bed.
- Stop smoking.
- Don't smoke after a meal, when the stomach is full, because this increases the chance of heartburn occurring.
- Manage your weight. People who are overweight are more likely to suffer from heartburn.
- Avoid exercise immediately before or after a meal.