

Heartburn & Indigestion

Ever had that rising pain and burning sensation in your chest? Feel like you're having a heart attack? It's more likely that you are suffering from heartburn or indigestion.

Heartburn affects more than your physical health; it can affect your quality of life. Up to 1 in 5 Australians experience heartburn at least once a week—a staggering statistic and certainly good reason for you to understand the condition and be able to manage it should you or a close family member/friend experience it.

What causes heartburn and indigestion?

Heartburn is a common feature of indigestion and happens when the acid contents from your stomach escape back up into your oesophagus (gullet). This causes a burning sensation in your chest which often rises up towards your throat.

Common Signs and Symptoms

- Abdominal pain
- Acid indigestion (acid reflux) with an acidic taste in the mouth
- Bloating
- Nausea with/without vomiting
- Excessive gas (burping or flatulence)
- Constipation/diarrhoea
- Decreased appetite
- Gurgling, rumbling or growling stomach discomfort

Risk Factors

A person may suffer from heartburn/indigestion for a number of reasons.

Below is a list of risk factors that may increase the chances of developing heartburn symptoms:

- Eating a large meal too quickly
- Engaging in physical activity such as lifting or bending after eating a large meal
- Consuming coffee, alcohol or chocolate
- Eating spicy foods
- Eating fatty/greasy foods
- Smoking cigarettes
- Anxiety and/or stress
- Advanced pregnancy, when the baby starts to push up against the stomach contents
- Being overweight/obese—this is because the extra fat inside the abdominal wall reduces the amount of room for the stomach and small intestines. Thus any extra pressure on the stomach will force the stomach contents up into the oesophagus.
- Taking medicines that decrease the protective layer in our stomach, thus increasing

- the effects of acid (e.g. Ibuprofen, aspirin, diclofenac)
- Wearing tight clothes that may put extra pressure on the stomach

I've heard people talk about GORD—is it the same as heartburn?

GORD stands for **Gastroesophageal reflux disease** and is a “disease” with heartburn being its most common “symptom.” GORD may be classified under 2 different entities:

Erosive GORD occurs when stomach acid moves in the wrong direction, flowing back up (reflux) into your oesophagus, causing discomfort. Over time, reflux of acid may erode the lining of the oesophagus, leading to inflammation and ulcers. The heartburn symptoms caused by this condition are generally controlled by very safe effective prescription medications from your GP.

Symptomatic GORD refers to a presence of typical symptoms of gastro-oesophageal reflux, but the wearing away process cannot be seen during an endoscopy. Although this condition may not lead to as many complications, symptoms can be as severe as those experienced with erosive oesophagitis.

Fortunately, the same drugs that treat "Erosive" GORD symptoms are available from the pharmacist to treat those with "Symptomatic" GORD symptoms (e.g. For patients suffering with heartburn after eating a pizza and having a couple of beers). We will talk about these medications later on in this information leaflet.

When should you speak with your pharmacist?

- If you feel as though the pain may be from the heart (i.e. it radiates through the jaw or into the arm and/or it gets worse when you exert yourself)
- If you have severe abdominal pain and/or vomiting symptoms (especially if it is blood-stained)
- If you have experienced unexplained weight loss
- If the bowel motions are tarry and black
- If antacids are needed more than 3-4 times a week or for more than 2 weeks in a row
- If there is any difficulty/pain when swallowing
- If you are on other medicines, especially an anti-inflammatory

What is an endoscopy?

An endoscopy involves examining the inside of a person's body using an endoscope (a small medical device consisting of a long, thin tube which has a light and a video camera). Images of the inside of the patient's body can be seen on a screen. Endoscopy is a minimally invasive diagnostic medical procedure and is helpful in examining interior surfaces of organs/tissue and also enabling biopsies/retrieving foreign objects.

Lifestyle Advice

- Chew your food completely and eat slowly
- Eat smaller meals more frequently, rather than 3 large meals daily
- Avoid late-night eating (i.e. try timing your meal so that you finish at least 2 hours before lying down/going to bed)
- Keep a food diary to work out which foods are your heartburn triggers
- Recognise and avoid foods that cause symptoms. Common triggers include spicy or fatty foods, tomatoes, orange juice, coffee and chocolate.
- Avoid caffeine
- Quit smoking
- Avoid over-indulging in alcohol
- Wait at least 30 minutes after eating for exercise
- If you take NSAIDS (e.g. nurofen, aspirin, voltaren), make sure they are always taken with food in the stomach
- Elevate your bed-head
- If you are overweight, losing some weight will help

Treatment Options for Optimal Care

H2-Receptor antagonists

These medicines are generally the “entry point” treatment in pharmacy for people suffering with heartburn, as they actually reduce the amount of acid that is produced in the stomach. Although they do not relieve heartburn as quickly as antacids, they are much more effective and have a longer lasting effect. With advice from the pharmacist, these medicines form part of our “optimal care” regime for patients presenting to a LiveLife Pharmacy with heartburn symptoms.

Please note: These products are a Pharmacy Only S2 product, so you will require assistance from our friendly staff when choosing these products.

E.g. Zantac, Chemist’s Own Ranitidine

Proton Pump Inhibitors

These agents are the most powerful acid production suppressors for the stomach. They can be taken long term (under consultation from the doctor and pharmacist) and are very effective in the majority of people who have troublesome heartburn. How do they work? Well, they actually inactivate the “pump” in the stomach responsible for acid secretion—very clever! Pharmacists are able to supply proton pump inhibitors in pack sizes lasting up to 2 weeks at a time.

Please note: These medicines are Schedule 3 medicines and must involve the pharmacist. Larger sizes are available on prescription from your doctor.

E.g. Somac, Pariet

Sometimes you may not wish to use “pharmacological” means to relieve your heartburn. If this is the case, there are some other options available in the pharmacy which may provide some mild symptom relief. Please read on.....

Antacids

If heartburn occurs infrequently and is mild, you may need to take medicine only “as needed” to soothe the symptoms when they arise. Antacid medicines are available over-the-counter at our pharmacies and are unscheduled items (i.e. kept in the front of shop).

Antacids act by neutralising the acid found in stomach juices and thus relieve heartburn symptoms quickly. However, it must be noted that their effect is temporary and short-lived, as they will only work on the acid present in the stomach at the time of taking them.

They may be taken as a liquid or as a chewable tablet and most commonly contain aluminium, magnesium and/or calcium salts.

Please note:

- Antacids can interfere with the absorption of some other medications, so it is important to check your other medicines with the pharmacist before taking these products.
- It is also important to note that some antacids are high in salt and this must be considered if you are on a salt-restricted diet or in pregnancy, heart disease and high blood pressure. If you suffer from kidney disease, the pharmacist may also need to check some further points with you.
- Magnesium salts may have a laxative effect. Aluminium causes constipation. Often antacid preparations combine these 2 ingredients to lower stomach acid without causing the upset of diarrhoea/constipation.
- Antacid liquids are usually faster and more effective than the chewable tablets. However, tablets are often more convenient to use.
- Antacids are NOT first line therapy in the treatment of recurrent/persistent heartburn. Please involve the pharmacist where possible so we can ensure treatment is optimal.

E.g. Tums, Quick-eze

Alginates

Some antacid preparations also contain another type of medicine known as an “alginic acid.” This particular preparation forms a gel (or raft) that floats on top of our stomach contents, so that regurgitation into the oesophagus is reduced. This then reduces the “acid burn” as it rises from your stomach. Alginates are most often used in combination with antacids in their formulation.

Please note:

- These medicines may not be suitable if you suffer from heart or kidney conditions—consult your pharmacist!
- Liquids such as “Gaviscon” should be considered “optimal care” if you are not wanting a “pharmacological/drug” treatment for your symptoms. Antacids on their own have little/no measurable effect on symptoms!

E.g. Gaviscon

Naturopathic Treatments

Herbal / complementary supplements are often used to provide relief of heartburn symptoms. Herbal demulcents like slippery elm and marshmallow provide almost immediate relief and soothe the inflamed GI lining. These are more effective when used as powders mixed into a paste or drunk as teas because tablets and capsules do not give topical relief.

Some other examples of herbal/complementary products that may be found in your LiveLife pharmacy:

- **Blackmores Celloid SPPC**—this product contains sodium-phosphate and potassium chloride and may help to neutralise gastric acidity and reduce dyspepsia. Please note this product is a “practitioner only” line and must involve the pharmacist/naturopath.
- **Ethical Nutrients Heartburn Relief**—this product contains the herb “Meadowsweet” and also calcium carbonate which together may reduce acid in the stomach and thus relieve symptoms of heartburn and dyspepsia. Please note that meadowsweet contains “salicylates” and thus is not suitable for all patients, especially those on blood thinners such as warfarin—consult your pharmacist if you have any medical conditions or are on other medicines.
- **Ethical Nutrients Heartburn Control**—contains extracts of aloe vera, liquorice, phellodendron, mandarin, pinellia and zinc to help with long-term control of ongoing heartburn symptoms.

Please note that if your heartburn symptoms persist, you should consult with the pharmacist—these naturopathic treatments are for short-term, mild symptom relief only.