

Heartburn Does Not Have To Cause Heartache

Know When Symptoms May Signal A More Serious, But Treatable, Condition

(NAPSA)—Many of us are painfully aware of how our diet affects our digestive system. What we may not be aware of, however, is that what we think is simple heartburn or “indigestion” may, in fact, be a condition known as gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD.

In fact, GERD affects an estimated five percent to seven percent of the world’s population, and many of those people with it go untreated because they don’t know that the symptoms may signal a more serious condition. “It’s unfortunate that people are unaware that their discomfort can be treated in many cases,” says Nancy Norton, president and founder of the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). “Worse, without correct treatment some of these cases can develop complications that if left undiagnosed, may endanger a person’s health and well-being.”

Persistent heartburn, occurring more than once a week, is the most common symptom of GERD. While occasional heartburn affects more than 60 million people in the United States at least once a month, studies suggest about one out of every four of those people actually experience it every single day, indicating a more serious condition.

Technically speaking, heartburn is caused by the backward flow, or reflux, of acid from the stomach up into the esophagus. When stomach acid touches the lining of the esophagus, it can



cause the burning sensation called heartburn. It also can damage the esophagus.

But heartburn is by no means the only symptom of GERD. In fact, some people with GERD do not experience heartburn at all. Other symptoms include belching, difficulty or pain when swallowing, chronic sore throat, erosion of tooth enamel, hoarseness in the morning, a sour taste in the mouth and bad breath, among others.

“People don’t have to suffer with the symptoms of GERD,” notes G. Richard Locke III, MD, head of the Esophageal Interest Group, Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, Rochester, MN. “Several effective treatments exist. Treating GERD might avoid its serious repercussions such as severe chest pain, esophageal stricture, bleeding, or Barrett’s esophagus, a potentially precancerous condition of the esophagus. People with symptoms of GERD should mention this to their physicians.”

Once diagnosed, however,

GERD can be treated and, in most cases, patients can begin to lead far more comfortable lives. Often, treatment involves lifestyle modifications. These changes to one’s daily routine might include avoidance or reduction of certain foods and beverages and changes in eating habits. Though diet itself does not cause GERD, certain foods can aggravate symptoms in some people; chocolate, caffeine, fried or fatty foods, alcoholic beverages and even peppermint may cause reflux. Physicians also might recommend that patients lose weight and stop smoking if necessary.

When lifestyle modifications alone do not alleviate the symptoms of GERD, your doctor may recommend medications, which can reduce the amount of acid your stomach produces. Other treatments include surgery, or procedures using new devices or implants to help prevent reflux.

None of these cure GERD—there is no known cure—but seeing a doctor for an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment can bring it under control and help patients lead more comfortable lives.

IFFGD is a nonprofit education and research organization that addresses issues surrounding life with functional GI and motility disorders. IFFGD helps improve care by enhancing awareness, educating and promoting research into treatments and cures for GI disorders.

For more information on GERD, visit www.aboutgerd.org or call 1-888-964-2001.