

Dyspepsia

("dis-pep-seeya")

also known as indigestion, heartburn, acid stomach, sour stomach, acid reflux, GERD, gastritis, etc.

Symptoms (you might have some or all of these):

- Burning/pain in the throat, chest, or upper belly
- Acid/sour taste after burping or spitting up
- Food 'sticking' in the throat or chest
- Tickling cough after eating

Basic instructions:

1. Don't pressurize your stomach. Eat small meals and don't lie down after eating.
2. Take a simple antacid when you have symptoms.
Examples: Tums, Pepto-bismol, Mylanta, a teaspoon of baking soda in a glass of water.
3. Stop using ibuprofen and other NSAIDs (see below for examples).
4. Do not take over-the-counter stomach drugs without asking your doctor first.
These drugs can make your problem worse.
Examples: H2 blockers and PPIs (see below for examples).

Fast facts:

1. About "little purple pills":

You need stomach acid to break down and digest protein foods. You can't live without it.

Stomach acid is made by "proton pumps" in the stomach cells.

"Proton pump inhibitors" (PPIs) *permanently* block the pumps from making acid. This is a short-term solution for a stomach emergency, like a bleeding ulcer (throwing up blood).

- Examples of over-the-counter PPIs: Prilosec, Prevacid.
- Examples of prescription PPIs: generic omeprazole, Nexium, Aciphex.

If you take a PPI daily, your stomach tries to protect you by making **more** proton pumps. More pumps = more acid.

A chemical called histamine ("**hiss**-ta-meen") controls the proton pumps, and tells them when to make acid.

Histamine is made when anything enters your stomach.

"Stomach antihistamines," also known as "H2 blockers," *temporarily* slow down the proton pumps, reducing stomach acid production.

- Examples of H2 blockers: ranitidine/Zantac, cimetidine/Tagamet, famotidine/Pepcid (over-the-counter and rx).

2. About ibuprofen:

Your stomach is protected from acid by a thick coating of mucus.

Chemicals called prostaglandins ("**pross**-ta-gland-ins") tell stomach cells to make this coating.

Prostaglandins also are involved in inflammation and pain.

"Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs" (NSAIDs), which we take for headaches, arthritis, fever, etc., work by reducing prostaglandins.

Less prostaglandins = less stomach coating = stomach is more vulnerable to acid.

- Examples of NSAIDs: ibuprofen/Advil, naproxen/Aleve, aspirin/Exedrine.

3. About reflux:

Your esophagus is protected from acid by a tight sphincter (drawstring muscle) closing it off.

If acid leaks upward into the esophagus through the sphincter ("refluxes"), you get acid reflux (heartburn).

Reflux can be caused by:

- Pressure on or in the stomach. Example: overeating, overweight, tight clothing, coughing or straining.
- Gravity. Example: bending over, lying down.
- A loose esophagus sphincter. Can be caused by:
 - alcohol
 - nicotine
 - fat-blocker weight-loss medicines (Alli, Xenical)
 - some blood pressure meds (calcium-channel blockers)
 - some antidepressants (tricyclic antidepressants)
 - some medicines for overactive bladder

Please don't stop taking any prescribed medicines without notifying your doctor.

FAQs:

What is a stomach ulcer? What is gastritis?

A stomach ulcer is a thin place in the stomach tissue. If the ulcer is over a blood vessel, it can cause bleeding into the stomach. Gastritis is inflammation of the stomach lining, causing redness and irritation. Both conditions are caused by thinning of the stomach coating (mucus), which protects the stomach from acid. Both conditions are very painful. However, you should not assume that stomach pain and dyspepsia are necessarily caused by these severe conditions.

What about H. pylori?

Helicobacter pylori is a germ that lives in the stomach coating. About half of all people have it. People in the same family will all have the same type, showing that it is very common and very easily spread from person to person. Most of the time, it doesn't cause any problems. In some cases, it seems that it can cause stomach ulcers. It can be treated with antibiotics; however, because it is easily spread, it often returns. Also, due to a recent trend of giving antibiotics for H. pylori, we are seeing more and more cases where the germ is resistant to antibiotics. For these reasons, many doctors do not routinely test for or treat H. pylori unless simpler treatments for dyspepsia have failed.

Am I having heartburn, or a heart attack?!

Warning signs of a heart attack (go to the emergency room if you have any of these with your chest pain):

- x Tightness/pressure in the center of the chest, possibly spreading to the shoulders, neck, or jaw.
- x Dizziness.
- x Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath.
- x A cold sweat.

When should I go to my primary-care doctor?

If you throw up red blood or vomit that looks like coffee grounds (digested blood).

If you have bowel movements that are black and tarry (sticking to the bowl, caused by digested blood).

If you are losing weight without trying.

If you can't stop taking stomach medicines without severe pain.

If you have risk factors for complicated stomach problems, and want help correcting them:

- overweight
- using NSAIDs regularly for pain
- using steroids (like prednisone) long-term
- heavy alcohol use
- smoking cigarettes
- family history that worries you

I've been taking PPIs (Prilosec, Prevacid, Nexium, Aciphex, omeprazole) for a long time. They don't work that great. But when I stop taking them, I have severe symptoms.

I suggest that with your doctor's help, you follow the "Basic instructions" above, PLUS:

1. *Replace* the PPI with an H2 blocker taken twice a day (see above for examples) for a few months.
2. Use simple antacids *several times a day*, as needed for stomach pain (see above for examples). These simple remedies neutralize the acid and coat the stomach, rather than crippling the stomach's ability to make acid and digest food.
Switch off between several types throughout the day, so you don't take too much of any one type.
3. It may take **months** to get results, so *be patient*. Your stomach has adjusted to making extra proton pumps to protect you from the PPIs; it takes a long time for your stomach to adjust to making fewer.

Herbal remedies?

People have reported improvements in their stomach pain by trying:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Aloe vera juice | Turmeric root |
| Slippery elm bark tea | Fennel seed tea |
| Marshmallow root tea | Apple cider vinegar (in water) |
- Licorice root (Note: one component of licorice root, glycyrrhizin ("gliss-er-**eye**-zin"), can raise blood pressure, make you retain water, and make you low in potassium, all bad for the heart. You can reduce this risk by using "deglycyrrhizinated licorice root" ["DGL"] instead.)

Special foods?

People have reported improvements in their stomach pain by **eating**:

- Naturally fermented foods (kim chee, sauerkraut)
- Probiotic foods (yogurt products with live cultures)

People have reported improvements in their stomach pain by **avoiding**:

- Fatty/fried foods
- Hot spicy foods
- Alcohol and caffeine
- Tomato products