



Holiday Heartburn or GERD?

It seems to happen every year – you eat just a bit too much of the turkey, enjoy that extra piece of pumpkin pie, or indulge in a second portion of yams. Hours later, the heartburn sets in.

As you reach for your usual over-the-counter remedy, however, we recommend you to take stock of your symptoms. Chronic heartburn can often be a symptom of something far more serious – GERD.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, affects an estimated five percent to seven percent or more of the global population – men, women, and children. GERD occurs when acidic contents flow back into the esophagus causing reflux. Although common, GERD often is unrecognized – its symptoms misunderstood. This is unfortunate because GERD is generally a treatable disease. Serious complications can result if it is not treated properly.

All too often, GERD is either self-treated or mistreated. That's why Thanksgiving week (November 24–30) is marked IFFGD's Annual GERD Awareness Week. GERD is a chronic disease that is treatable and can usually be controlled. But that can only happen if people understand what this disease is and how to recognize the symptoms.

Symptoms of GERD vary from person to person. Heartburn that occurs more frequently than once per week, becomes more severe at night, or wakes a person from sleep may be a sign of a more serious condition like GERD and consultation with a physician is advised. Even occasional heartburn if it has occurred for a period of five years or more, or is associated with difficulty in swallowing – may signal a more serious condition.

Only a physician can make a diagnosis and provide treatment for GERD. Over-the-counter preparations provide only temporary symptom relief. They do not prevent recurrence of symptoms or allow an injured esophagus to heal.

This disease is often manageable once a person realizes the need to get medical treatment and understands the difference between simple heartburn and GERD symptoms. Effective treatment for GERD will bring the symptoms under control so that one can feel better and can carry on a normal life.

Under a physician's care, inflammation or injury of the esophagus will most often be healed, and serious medical complications managed or even prevented. Treatment options include lifestyle modifications, medications, surgery, or a combination of methods.

Holiday time or any time, it's wise to be aware of the dangers of GERD.

Did you know – heartburn is not the only symptom of GERD?

Chronic heartburn is the most common symptom of GERD. Acid regurgitation (refluxed material into the mouth) is another common symptom. But numerous less common symptoms other than heartburn may be associated with GERD. These may include:

- Belching
- Difficulty or pain when swallowing
- Waterbrash (sudden excess of saliva)
- Dysphagia (the sensation of food sticking in the esophagus)
- Chronic sore throat
- Laryngitis
- Inflammation of the gums
- Erosion of the enamel of the teeth
- Chronic irritation in the throat
- Hoarseness in the morning
- A sour taste
- Bad breath

Chest pain may indicate acid reflux. Nevertheless, this kind of pain or discomfort should prompt urgent medical evaluation. Possible heart conditions must always be excluded first.

Relief of symptoms after a two-week trial therapy with a proton pump inhibitor (a prescription medication that inhibits gastric acid secretion) is an indication that GERD is the cause. This can also be confirmed with pH monitoring, which measures the level of acid refluxing into the esophagus and as high as the larynx.

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This article is in no way intended to replace the knowledge or diagnosis of your doctor. We advise seeing a physician whenever a health problem arises requiring an expert's care.

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