

Louisiana Pharmacists Association

450 Laurel Street, Suite 1400, Baton Rouge, LA 70801

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Julie Fuselier

Crystal Carter

Phone: 225/346-6883

FAX: 225/344-1132

Louisiana Pharmacists Association Educates about Self-Treatment of Heartburn

Louisiana is famous for superb cuisine; unfortunately, enjoying the cuisine often comes with a price- heartburn. Heartburn is a burning sensation in the chest caused by stomach acid irritating the esophagus. Occasional heartburn is common in the majority of Americans and poses no health risks. However, heartburn occurring more frequently can be a symptom of a more serious chronic condition known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).¹

What can cause heartburn?

Heartburn is essentially a result of the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) under activity. The two main factors contributing to this under activity are: increased pressure on the LES and improper relaxation of the LES. There are many things that contribute to increased pressure on the LES, such as: overeating, obesity, exercising or lying down after eating, wearing tight fitting clothes, and pregnancy.² The second contributing factor to LES under activity, improper relaxation, can be caused by certain foods and beverages, such as chocolate, mint, coffee and colas. Certain prescription medicines, such as blood pressure medication and opioid-pain medications can also cause improper relaxation of the LES.^{2,3} Check with your pharmacist to determine if your medications can cause heartburn. Smoking and anti-inflammatory drugs, such as aspirin and Advil, in addition to spicy foods and citrus fruits, can cause direct irritation of the esophagus.

Non-drug Remedies and Lifestyle Modifications

There are a number of non-pharmacological methods available to help reduce or prevent the discomfort of heartburn: avoid foods, beverages, activities, and medications (if possible) which

are known to cause or worsen heartburn, eliminate or reduce the amount of cigarettes you smoke per day, eat smaller portions throughout the day, eat at least three hours before lying down and raise the head of the bed by at least six inches. These are just a few methods which can be used to help alleviate or prevent the discomfort associated with heartburn.^{1, 2, 3}

Over-the-Counter Drug Treatment

Over the past ten years, a number of medications have joined the typical antacids as over-the-counter treatments for heartburn. There are three classes of medications useful for treatment of heartburn: antacids, histamine-2 receptor blockers, and proton-pump inhibitors.

Antacids, such as Tums, Rolaids, and Maalox, work by neutralizing the acidic contents of the stomach. They are typically used to quickly alleviate mild, infrequent heartburn, and should be taken at the start of symptoms.³

Histamine-2 (H2) receptor blockers, including Zantac, Tagamet, and Pepcid, are used to reduce the amount of acid produced by the stomach. H2 receptor blockers can be used for infrequent, mild/moderate heartburn. These should be taken at the start of symptoms or can be taken 1 hour before eating foods known to cause heartburn. Relief usually begins 30-45 minutes after taking the medications and can last between 4-10 hours.³

Proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs), such as Prilosec and Prevacid, also work by reducing stomach acid production. These medications are indicated for heartburn occurring 2 or more days a week and is mild/moderate in severity. It is not for relief of occasional, infrequent heartburn. PPIs should be taken every morning before breakfast for 14 days. A 14-day course of treatment should alleviate symptoms for approximately 4 months.³

If you are experiencing heartburn, talk to your pharmacist to determine what the best course of treatment is for you! Remember to consult with your pharmacists on dosage and frequency, as well as potential side effects and drug interactions associated with these medications.³

When should I seek treatment by a physician?

Although medications are available over-the-counter, certain situations can place a person at increased risk for GERD or other conditions requiring a physician's care. Consult your physician if you experience the following:

- Heartburn that occurs while taking over-the-counter medications
- Heartburn after using an over-the-counter medication for 2 weeks

- Heartburn that last for more than 3 months
- Heartburn that awakens you at night
- Severe heartburn or stomach pain
- Difficulty or pain on swallowing food
- Continuous nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Chronic hoarseness, cough, choking, or wheezing
- Unexplained weight loss
- Light-headedness, sweating, dizziness accompanied by vomiting blood or passing black, tarry stool
- Symptoms of heart attack, such as chest pain or shoulder, arm, neck pain with shortness of breath

Patients who experience these conditions should see a physician for further evaluation.³

References:

1. WebMD Heartburn/GERD Health Center Website. Available at: <http://www.webmd.com/heartburn-gerd/guide/understanding-heartburn-basics>
2. Heartburn. eMedicineHealth Website. Available at: http://www.emedicinehealth.com/heartburn/article_em.htm
3. Zweber A and Berardi RR. Heartburn and Dyspepsia. In: Berardi RR et al. eds. *Handbook of Nonprescription Drugs: An Interactive Approach to Self-Care*. 16th ed. Washington, D.C.: The American Pharmacists Association; 2009: 231 – 246

Author:

Jonathan M. Savoy, Pharm.D. Candidate

University of Louisiana at Monroe College of Pharmacy

The Louisiana Pharmacists Association, established in 1882, strives to promote the interests of all pharmacists of the State of Louisiana. For more information about the LPA and its benefits, contact Julie Fuselier or Phyllis Perron, LPA Co-Executive Directors at 225/346-6883 or visit our website at www.louisianapharmacists.com.

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