



Frequent Heartburn Fact Sheet

More than 50 million Americans suffer from frequent heartburn¹, or heartburn that occurs two or more days per week.

About Frequent Heartburn

Frequent heartburn is a result of the backing up of stomach acid into the esophagus. Typically the lower esophageal sphincter muscle opens to allow food to pass, but then quickly closes. However, in frequent heartburn sufferers the muscle relaxes and allows food and acid from the stomach to travel back up into the esophagus. As a result, sufferers often have a burning sensation in the chest and/or throat, a sour or bitter taste in the mouth, difficulty swallowing, chronic coughing and wheezing or other asthma-like symptoms. These symptoms of frequent heartburn can become worse when one lies down to go to sleep at night.

Lifestyle and behavioral factors that can heighten heartburn include certain foods, alcohol, large meals, certain medications, and cigarette smoking.² Infrequent heartburn can often be controlled by modifying behaviors, such as avoiding certain foods like fried or fatty foods, chocolate, coffee, carbonated beverages, citrus fruits and tomato products, or quitting smoking. However, lifestyle modifications may not completely control heartburn symptoms in frequent heartburn sufferers who often need to seek treatment for their symptoms.

Impact

Frequent heartburn can be very painful, significantly interrupting daily activities and disrupting a full night's sleep.

Treatment

There are a number of over-the-counter medications available for the treatment of heartburn, both occasional and frequent. They include:

- *Antacids*
Antacids neutralize stomach acid and are indicated for immediate relief. Relief from an antacid lasts for about 30 minutes, and they're used mostly for occasional heartburn.³
- *H₂ Blockers*
These drugs, which stop further acid production by blocking H₂ receptors on the acid-producing cells lining the stomach, are indicated for relieving and preventing heartburn associated with acid indigestion and sour stomach. H₂ blockers don't work as quickly as antacids, but their effect lasts longer—up to 10 hours. People who have episodic heartburn may find them helpful.³
- *Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs)*
Over-the-counter PPIs are indicated for the treatment of frequent heartburn. PPIs work by stopping the release of acid into the stomach and can provide relief of frequent heartburn up to 24 hours.

Frequent heartburn can often be effectively treated through self-care, but if symptoms persist, sufferers should consult a physician.

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References

1 National Heart Burn Alliance: http://www.heartburnalliance.org/frequent_heartburn.php

2 The Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/heartburn-gerd/DS00095/DSECTION=causes>

3 Zweber A, Berardi RR. Heartburn and dyspepsia. In: Berardi RR, Kroon LA, McDermott JH, et al, eds. Handbook of Nonprescription Drugs: An Interactive Approach to Self-Care. 15th ed. Washington, DC: American Pharmacists Association; 2006:265-282.