

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT Indigestion

INHEALTH | MAKING HEALTHCARE BETTER

What is indigestion?

Indigestion, also known as **dyspepsia**, is a general term used to describe discomfort or pain in the upper abdomen or chest, usually after meals. When a burning discomfort is felt behind the breast bone, it is known as **heartburn**.

Pain in the upper abdomen may come and go and can occur at any time. For some people it can be relieved by food or milk, especially if it feels like a hunger pain, although for others it can occur after eating. The stomach may feel full soon after starting to eat, so that it is difficult to finish a meal, or there may be an uncomfortable sense of fullness or bloating after a meal. It can also occur without any relation to food at all. The word indigestion may also be used to describe nausea, retching or even vomiting after food.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Indigestion can occur for a number of reasons:

- A break in the lining of the stomach, known as an Ulcer which contains a component of digestive juice, called Pepsin.
- Inflammation of the stomach lining as a result of excess alcohol, use of aspirin type drugs or due to infection.
- Inflammation of the oesophagus (gullet) known as Oesophagitis, usually caused by digestive juices (acid) repeatedly moving upward from the stomach to the gullet.
- Disorders of the intestine, gallbladder or pancreas.
- Irritation of the stomach lining caused by arthritis drugs.

HOW CAN I AVOID INDIGESTION?

Although more research is needed to determine all the risk factors, the following steps should help:

- Don't smoke.

- Eat meals at regular times.
- Do not rush meals.
- Eat and drink in moderation.
- Avoid those foods you associate with symptoms of indigestion.
- Use paracetamol instead of aspirin.
- Avoid taking anti arthritis pain killers and take advice from your doctor on alternatives.
- Avoid stress.

HOW CAN I AVOID HEARTBURN?

- Eat your evening meal well before going to bed so that you have time to digest.
- Raise the head of the bed six to eight inches on blocks: this will help to keep the acid down in the stomach where it belongs.
- Avoid being overweight.
- Avoid excessive caffeine, fats and alcohol.
- Avoid tighter belts or clothing.
- Avoid bending down or lying flat after meals.

INDIGESTION CAN OFTEN BE CONFUSED WITH HEART PAIN

Pain from the heart is also often felt in the chest and sometimes in the upper abdomen. Please consult your doctor if:

- The pain is brought on by exercise and relieved by rest - this could be suspected angina.
- The pain is felt intensely in the centre of the chest and spreads to one or both arms (in particular the left), into the lower jaw, and feels like a heavy pressure - this could be a suspected heart attack.

WHEN SHOULD I SEEK ADVICE?

Many people who suffer occasional indigestion and heartburn can obtain relief from simple antacid tablets which are available from your chemist.

However, you should consult your doctor if:

- you suffer from heartburn regularly (daily or weekly) and it persists for more than 2 weeks and you are not responding to antacids;
- you are over 45 and/or have a family history of gastric problems;
- you take aspirin or anti-arthritis pain killers regularly;
- you drink or smoke heavily;
- it is interfering with your sleep, leisure or work.

You should consult your doctor URGENTLY if you experience:

- Severe prolonged chest pain
- Red or altered blood (like coffee grounds) in vomit
- Black tarry stools
- Rapid weight loss
- Recurrent vomiting
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Yellowing of the skin (Jaundice)
- Pain radiating to the back

WHAT INVESTIGATIONS MAY BE NECESSARY?

Many people do not require investigation, but as persistent indigestion may suggest a more serious underlying complaint, the doctor may decide to arrange:



An endoscopy

which involves swallowing a slim flexible telescope with a light in the end to enable the doctor to look into the stomach.



A barium meal test

which involves swallowing a liquid which enables the outline of the stomach to show up on X-Ray.



An ultrasound scan

a technique using reflected soundwaves to show the structure of abdominal organs. This technique does not involve passing any tubes into the body.



A blood test

to detect anaemia or other abnormality.

An explanation of the symptoms and reassurance will be offered by the doctor.

Specific advice will be given if there are factors in your lifestyle which may be contributing to the difficulties. Medicine may be prescribed, ranging from antacids to more powerful drugs, depending on the cause of the problems. Complementary medicine is also a possible option but should be discussed with your doctor. Surgical treatment may be needed for gallstones and sometimes, for other conditions.



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