

UNDERSTANDING ACID REFLUX AND ORAL HEALTH

It's common to experience gastroesophageal reflux – otherwise known as acid indigestion, acid reflux or heartburn – every so often. But heartburn also is a symptom of a chronic condition known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which affects about 20 percent of the U.S. population, according to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse.



What is acid reflux and GERD?

Acid reflux occurs when muscles of the lower esophagus relax and allow stomach acids to flow upward into the esophagus and even the mouth. These stomach acids can cause irritation and inflammation of the esophagus. Acid reflux may progress further, developing into GERD. In patients who have GERD, the esophageal muscles are unable to keep stomach acids from flowing upward, causing corrosion of the esophageal lining and the uncomfortable burning sensation associated with heartburn.

What are the signs and symptoms of GERD?

- Heartburn
- Difficulty swallowing
- Regurgitation
- Burning sensation in mouth
- Sore throat
- Nausea, vomiting and belching
- Chronic coughing
- Erosion of tooth enamel
- Tooth sensitivity
- Chipping and discoloration of teeth
- Halitosis (bad breath)

Talk with your dentist about your symptoms if you're experiencing them more than twice a week, as this could be an indicator of a chronic condition.

How is GERD treated?

Although GERD is a chronic condition, its symptoms can be treated using medications and by making lifestyle modifications. In addition to taking over-the-counter antacids and prescription H2 receptor blockers, you can reduce GERD symptoms by:

- Avoiding beverages such as alcohol and coffee, as well as chocolate and spicy/greasy or tomato-based foods
- Quitting smoking; smokers are more likely to develop GERD
- Avoiding eating several hours before bed, or lying down two to three hours after eating
- Losing weight if you are overweight or obese
- Not wearing tight-fitting clothing

How does GERD affect my oral health?

In addition to damaging the esophagus and increasing your risk of esophageal cancer, over time, GERD can erode tooth enamel. Research indicates tooth enamel begins to erode at a pH, or acid level, of 5.5. With a pH of less than 2.0, your stomach acid can easily damage tooth enamel and cause increased tooth sensitivity, decay, discoloration and chipping.

How can I protect my teeth against acid reflux?

Practicing good oral hygiene is the best way to prevent acid reflux or GERD from damaging your teeth and causing decay. In addition to brushing for two minutes twice a day, you can:

- Visit your dentist regularly for a tooth enamel evaluation.
- Use a toothpaste that's formulated for sensitive teeth.
- Do not brush your teeth for one hour after you consume acidic foods or drinks.
- Dissolve baking soda in water and swish the water in your mouth after you experience acid reflux.
- Ask your dentist about fluoride treatments to strengthen your teeth.
- Ask your dentist about wearing a mouthguard at night to prevent acid from damaging your teeth.
- Avoid over-the-counter antacids that have a high sugar content.

If you believe you may be at risk for acid reflux or GERD, speak with your dentist or physician.