

Heartburn and Indigestion (Dyspepsia)

SELF CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 3

This information helps you to know what is normal and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from heartburn or indigestion (also called dyspepsia). It also tells you when you should become concerned and when it is best to seek medical advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

Dyspepsia is common The symptoms in the upper abdomen described below affect an estimated 4 out of 10 people in any one year.

How does it present? Heartburn and indigestion is often first noticed as burning pain or discomfort in the upper abdomen or chest. It can also create an unpleasant sour taste in your mouth – this is from stomach acid.

Timing Symptoms typically occur after meals and can be exacerbated when lying down or bending over.

Other problems Dyspepsia is commonly accompanied by belching, feeling bloated or sick, or experiencing coughs or hiccups that keep coming back.

What causes dyspepsia? Common causes include acid reflux where stomach acid comes up from your stomach into your oesophagus (food pipe or gullet).

Acid reflux can be triggered by certain foods and drinks, being overweight, smoking, stress, and pregnancy. It can also be caused by inflammation of the food pipe by certain medicines, including ibuprofen (check the patient information leaflet). Another cause is when part of the stomach squeezes through the diaphragm muscle into the chest (known as hiatus hernia).

Less commonly, a stomach ulcer or cancer of the stomach or oesophagus may be responsible.

Sometimes, no underlying cause can be found. This is known as 'functional dyspepsia'.

What can I expect to happen?

Duration

Symptoms usually improve within 1 or 2 weeks. But if you need to take indigestion medicines regularly for several weeks or if your symptoms affect your day-to-day life, consult your GP.

Investigations

Most people do not need tests. But if symptoms are not controlled, or your GP suspects an underlying cause, you may need tests such as blood tests, a stool (poo) test to check your stomach for *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria (a common cause of heartburn symptoms) or referring you for an endoscopy (a thin and flexible tube-like camera which looks into your oesophagus and stomach).

Treatment for heartburn and indigestion

Over the counter medicines

Various medications that neutralise the acid in your stomach (antacids) as well as others called H₂-receptor antagonists and proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) are available without prescription at pharmacies.

It is best not to take these medicines for a long time without consulting a member of your pharmacy team or other health professionals.

Avoid ibuprofen and aspirin-like drugs.

If you take OTC anti-inflammatory pain killers, such as aspirin or ibuprofen, regularly, consult a health professional in case these could be the cause of the indigestion.

Speak to a member of your pharmacy team for advice.

What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

Change your diet In 8 out of 10 people, symptoms will improve by making lifestyle changes, such as eating healthier and losing weight.

Avoiding Trigger foods and drinks Coffee, chocolate, tomatoes, fatty or spicy foods can all worsen your symptoms. So too can carbonated soft drinks.

Bedtime Also, avoid fatty and fried meals and large meals within 3 to 4 hours before sleeping. And, always eat slowly and chew properly.

Smoking and Alcohol Reducing or stopping smoking and alcohol intake may help improve your symptoms.

Weight loss Losing weight if you are overweight or obese will likely improve your symptoms.

Medication If lifestyle changes don't work, symptoms can improve by taking over the counter medications such as antacids or alginates, or with prescribed medication. Speak to a member of your pharmacy team in the first instance.

When to seek help

Rarely, more serious medical problems may cause indigestion – particularly if you are aged 55 or over. Seek medical advice if your symptoms last for most days for 3 weeks or if symptoms do not respond to treatment or you notice any of the following:

- **Pain and other chest/stomach symptoms** You suffer from severe, persistent (longer than 3 weeks), worsening and unexplained pain in your upper abdomen – particularly if occurring together with other symptoms, such as pain in your chest, breathlessness, sweating, feeling sick or vomiting.
- **Vomiting blood or persistent vomiting** You vomit blood or dark lumps (like 'coffee grounds') or you are persistently vomiting.
- **Dark stools (poo)** Your stool colour has become very dark (looking like tar). But remember that if you take iron tablets your stool can also become black – a harmless side effect which will go when you stop taking iron.
- **Feeling faint** You feel faint, or you've collapsed.
- **Swallowing problems** You develop difficulties with swallowing.
- **Other problems** You suffer from unexplained fever, night sweats, unintentional weight loss, or you notice a swelling or mass in your upper abdomen.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help you with assessing or treating symptoms and with information about stopping smoking or weight management.

Or, visit the NHS website in your country:

- [NHS England](#)
- [NHS Inform, Scotland](#)
- [NHS111, Wales](#)
- [NHS NI Direct, Northern Ireland](#)