



How to Prevent and Treat Heartburn Without Medication, According to Gastro Docs

By Dana Hudepohl
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One in 3 Americans experience heartburn every single week, according to a survey published in the journal *Gastroenterology*, and many who take popular heartburn medications continue to have symptoms. Fortunately, medication isn't the only remedy. "By adjusting diet and lifestyle, you can get to the root of the issue—and sometimes reverse it altogether," says [Vanessa Méndez, M.D.](#), a triple board-certified gastroenterologist. Though heartburn is common, it's not harmless. Ignoring it over time can lead to serious complications. Here's what you need to know and how to take control.

What Causes Heartburn?

When you swallow food, it passes through your throat and esophagus. A ring of muscle fibers at the bottom of your esophagus, called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), relaxes to let the food pass into your stomach. If the sphincter doesn't seal back up properly, it can lead to acid reflux, where stomach acid leaks back into your esophagus. One of the most common symptoms of this acid backwash is a burning feeling in the upper abdominal area or chest.

How to Avoid It

Head off uncomfortable heartburn with these tips from gastroenterologists.

Time your meals.

Try to avoid eating right before high-intensity exercise like running or weightlifting, and at least two hours before going to bed. "Gravity is always at play, and as simple as it sounds, it plays a role in how food moves through the digestive system," says Méndez. When you lie down flat at night, gravity works against you.

Slow down at mealtime, and stop eating when you're full.

"For some people heartburn can be a rare, short-lived experience after a large overindulgent meal," says gastroenterologist Sarina Pasricha, M.D., MSCR. Eating slowly and having smaller, more frequent meals may protect you against heartburn.

Avoid fatty foods.

Foods that are common in the standard American diet (SAD)—such as fried food, [ultraprocessed foods](#), and high-fat meats and cheese—are common triggers. High fat content in foods increases the time food spends in the stomach, and the more time it spends in the stomach, the more opportunity the acid has to come back up. SAD foods can also contribute to weight gain, and abdominal fat is one of the biggest risk factors for heartburn, according to the [American College of Gastroenterology](#).

Choose whole plant foods.

"Whole plant foods are packed with fiber that is digested further down the intestinal tract, putting less strain on the stomach," says Méndez. "This results in a decreased release of gastric enzymes and acid." A [study](#) of people with acid reflux who consumed a plant-based diet with high amounts of fiber showed a 63% reduction of symptoms in six weeks. A WFPB lifestyle can also keep weight in check. "Weight loss can also significantly help with heartburn symptoms," says Pasricha.

Keep a food journal.

Do you get heartburn after eating spicy food? Or after consuming acidic foods, like citrus or tomato sauce? Do

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you see a pattern after consuming other common triggers including alcohol, carbonated or caffeinated drinks, or medications such as ibuprofen? By listening to your body's signals, you can find clues and change your approach.

How to Treat Heartburn

When heartburn strikes, try these natural remedies for quick relief.

Take a deep breath.

In a small randomized controlled trial published in *Gastroenterology*, people with gastric reflux who were instructed to use deep diaphragmatic breathing for 30 minutes after each meal decreased the amount of acid reaching their esophagus after a meal by half.

Avoid peppermint.

Many people associate peppermint with soothing an upset stomach, but it has the opposite effect on heartburn. Peppermint can relax the LES and worsen reflux symptoms, says Pasricha.

Drink soy milk.

Plant-based milk, especially soy because of its higher level of protein, can help neutralize any acid that makes its way up, says [Will Bulsiewicz, MD MSCI](#), a board certified gastroenterologist and author of *The Fiber Fueled Cookbook*.

Work with gravity.

Using a pillow wedge to elevate your head at least 6 inches can invite the assistance of gravity at bedtime.

If It Keeps Happening

If you have heartburn more than twice a week, you may have [gastroesophageal reflux disease \(GERD\)](#). This repetitive acid reflux, over time, can damage the esophagus and lead to serious health problems, including Barrett's esophagus (a precancerous condition). Other signs of GERD include regurgitation, sore throat, sour or dry mouth, trouble swallowing, dental erosion, laryngitis, the feeling of food caught in the throat, and asthma. If

you have these symptoms, it's important to see your doctor.

To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#). For meal-planning support, check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path.