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Heartburn: What Works Best for You?

An anyone who's watched TV lately can't miss the many commercials for heartburn medication. It's a growing market because more Americans are suffering from heartburn-related conditions. Still, pills may not be the answer for everyone, and they're not the best place to start.

Understanding Heartburn

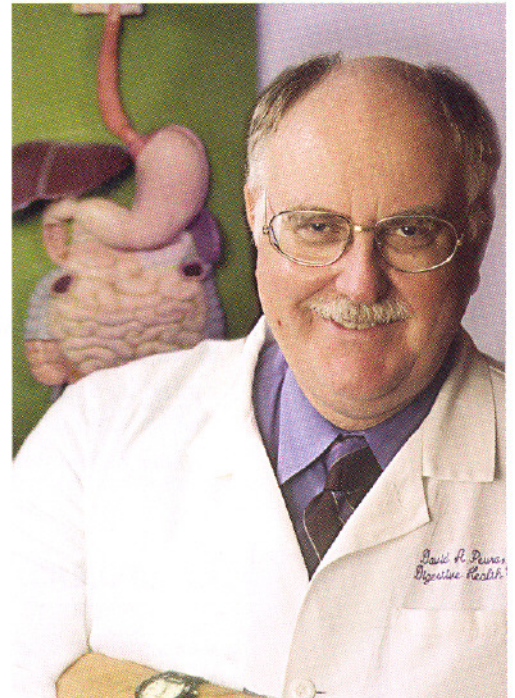
Twenty-five percent to 30 percent of Americans suffer from frequent heartburn. Heartburn is caused by stomach acid that backs up into the esophagus—the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach.

A muscle between the stomach and the esophagus—the lower esophageal sphincter (LES)—plays a major role. When working properly, the LES opens to allow food into the stomach. In some people, the LES becomes weak or doesn't always close properly, allowing stomach acid to flow back up. This can lead to varying degrees of heartburn and, in some cases, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

Why are there more cases of GERD than ever before? "We eat too fast, we eat too much, and we eat the wrong things," says Dr. David Peura, associate chief of UVA's Division of Gastroenterology and part of UVA's Digestive Health Center of Excellence. "We eat high-fat foods that delay stomach emptying. We inhale our food rather than eat it, and we often eat large meals at night. All of these things can provoke reflux."

Cancer and Other Risks?

Frequent reflux of stomach acid can damage the lining of the esophagus, which isn't protected against the acid as the stomach is. It also may lead to hoarseness, chronic cough, asthma, tooth decay and esophagitis—an inflammation of the esophagus. The chest pain



Heartburn that occurs more than once or twice a week may be acid reflux disease, which can lead to more serious health problems, says Dr. David Peura.

that accompanies heartburn can feel similar to the most common sign of a heart attack.

While GERD can cause serious damage, doctors are beginning to realize that the threat of it leading to cancer is not as great as they had thought. "We recognize that while that is a possibility, it's far more the exception than the rule," says Dr. Peura.

Acid Backup

Several factors may weaken the LES or increase the amount of acid in the stomach. These include:

- obesity
- pregnancy
- smoking
- lying down or bending over after eating.

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THE WORD ON GERD

For a free brochure on GERD and heartburn, including GERD in children, call 434-924-3627 (DOCS).

If you have heartburn regularly over long periods of time, you should see a digestive health specialist. *U.S. News and World Report* ranked UVa's Digestive Health Center of Excellence and its team of experts as one of the top digestive health centers in the nation. For an appointment, call 434-924-3627 (DOCS).

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To prevent heartburn, don't eat "red light" foods (see photo), manage your weight and don't eat anything for three hours before bed time.

Over-The-Counter Relief

People with mild or occasional episodes of heartburn can usually treat it with over-the-counter antacids, such as Tums or Mylanta. These medications quickly neutralize stomach acids but work only for short periods of time.

For more severe heartburn, H₂ blockers such as Tagamet, Pepcid, Axid and Zantac, which don't need prescriptions, reduce the amount of acid the stomach produces and provide relief for up to 12 hours. Larger doses may require a prescription.

If you are using either type of acid reducers regularly for more than two weeks, you should see a doctor because you may need different treatment.

Over-the-Counter Prilosec

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently approved one popular drug that suppresses production of stomach acid, Prilosec, for sale



"Red light" foods that can bring on heartburn include acidic foods such as tomatoes and oranges, fried foods, chocolate and alcohol. They should be avoided. Good "green light" foods include bread, yogurt and pretzels.

without a prescription. That means it should be less expensive than other similar prescription medications. However, Dr. Peura stresses that Prilosec should not be taken for more than two weeks without a doctor's direction. ■