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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

This information explains the causes, symptoms, and treatment of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

## About GERD

GERD is a disorder where the contents of your stomach flow back into your esophagus. Your esophagus is the tube that carries food and liquids from your mouth to your stomach (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Your esophagus and stomach

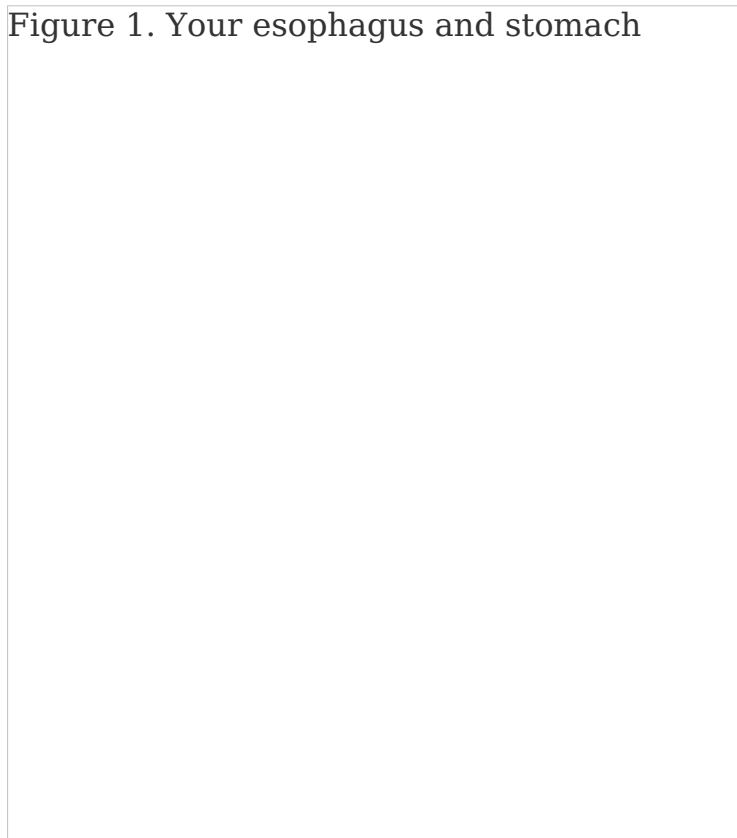


Figure 1. Your esophagus and stomach

GERD can cause esophagitis, which is inflammation (redness and swelling)

of the lining in your esophagus. If you don't treat esophagitis, it can cause ulcers (sores), bleeding, and narrowing in your esophagus. It may also increase your risk for esophageal cancer.

## Causes of GERD

GERD can be caused by many things, including:

- Eating large meals.
- Eating and drinking large amounts of:
  - Fried or fatty foods
  - Spicy foods
  - Citrus fruits, such as oranges, lemons, grapefruits, and limes
  - Chocolate
  - Mint
  - Tomatoes
  - Caffeinated drinks, such as coffee, tea, and soda
- Exercising after a meal.
- Lying down, especially after meals. This can make it easier to regurgitate food (when food moves from your stomach into your esophagus, creating a sour, acidic taste from your stomach fluid).
- Smoking.
- Drinking alcohol.
- Having a hiatal hernia (when the top of your stomach bulges through your diaphragm). Your diaphragm is the muscle that separates your abdomen (belly) and chest.
- Pregnancy.
- Obesity (having a high, unhealthy amount of body fat).
- Pressure on your abdomen. This can happen if you:
  - Strain while having a bowel movement (pooping) due to constipation

(having fewer bowel movements than usual).

- Strain while coughing, bending, or lifting.
- Wear pants that are too tight in the waist. This pressure can squeeze stomach contents up and into your esophagus.

## Symptoms of GERD

The symptoms of GERD may include:

- Heartburn that usually happens 30 to 60 minutes after eating
- Regurgitation
- Trouble swallowing
- Chest pain
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Feeling like you have a lump in your throat

## Treatment for GERD

The goal of treatment for GERD is to reduce your symptoms. Most people feel better with medication and lifestyle changes. Here are some ways you can reduce your GERD symptoms:

- Don't eat large meals. Eat smaller meals more often. This will allow you to eat the same amount of food, but in smaller portions that will be easier to digest.
- Don't lie down for at least 2 to 3 hours after eating.
- Avoid late-night snacks.
- Avoid some foods, such as:
  - Peppermint and spearmint candy, gum, and mints
  - Fried or fatty foods

- Avoid some drinks, such as:
  - Acidic juices, such as orange juice
  - Alcohol
  - Peppermint and spearmint tea
  - Caffeinated drinks, such as coffee and tea
  - Carbonated (fizzy) drinks, such as soda
- Take antacids (medication that relieves the acid in your stomach) or sit upright to reduce heartburn.
- Don't smoke cigarettes or use other tobacco products. MSK has specialists who can help you quit smoking. For more information about our Tobacco Treatment Program, call 212-610-0507. You can also ask your healthcare provider for information about the program.
- Use blocks to raise the head of your bed or sleep on a wedge pillow so your upper torso is raised to help with symptoms at night. You can buy a wedge pillow from your local pharmacy or health supply store.
- Avoid putting pressure on your abdomen.
  - Limit bending and vigorous exercise after eating.
  - Avoid tight-fitting clothing.
- Prevent or manage constipation. For more information about how to manage constipation, read the resource *Constipation* (<https://sandbox18.mskcc.org/pe/constipation>).
- If you're overweight, you need to eat fewer calories than your body needs, increase your physical activity, or both to get to a healthy weight. For more information about making healthy food and exercise choices, read our resource *Eat Your Way to Better Health* ([https://sandbox18.mskcc.org/pe/eat\\_better\\_health](https://sandbox18.mskcc.org/pe/eat_better_health)).
- Make sure to take any medication your doctor prescribes you as instructed.

# When to Call Your Healthcare Provider

Call your healthcare provider if:

- Your symptoms don't get better after trying the treatments above.
- You have trouble swallowing.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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