

Patient education: Acid reflux (gastroesophageal reflux disease) in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is acid reflux? — Acid reflux is when the acid that is normally in your stomach backs up into the esophagus, tube that carries food from your mouth to your stomach ([figure 1](#)). Another term for acid reflux is "gastroesophageal reflux disease," or GERD.

What are the symptoms of acid reflux? — The symptoms include:

- Burning in the chest, known as heartburn
- Burning in the throat or an acid taste in the throat
- Stomach or chest pain
- Trouble swallowing
- Having a raspy voice or a sore throat
- Unexplained cough

Is there anything I can do on my own to improve my symptoms? — Yes. You might feel better if you:

- Lose weight (if you are overweight)
- Raise the head of your bed by 6 to 8 inches (for example, by putting blocks of wood or rubber under 2 legs of the bed or a Styrofoam wedge under the mattress)
- Avoid foods that make your symptoms worse (examples include coffee, chocolate, alcohol, peppermint, and fatty foods)
- Cut down on the amount of alcohol you drink
- Stop smoking, if you smoke
- Avoid lying down for 3 hours after a meal

What treatments can help with my acid reflux? — There are a few main types of medicines that can help with the symptoms of acid reflux: antacids, surface acting agents, histamine blockers, and proton pump inhibitors ([table 1](#)). All of these medicines work by reducing or blocking stomach acid. But they each do that in a different way.

Antacids and surface acting agents can relieve mild symptoms, but they work only for a short time. Histamine blockers are stronger and last longer than antacids and surface acting agents. You can buy antacids and most histamine blockers without a prescription.

Proton pump inhibitors are the most effective medicines in treating GERD. Some of these medicines are sold without a prescription. But there are other versions that your doctor or nurse can prescribe.

Sometimes acid reflux medicines are less expensive if you get them with a prescription. Other times nonprescription medicines are less expensive. If cost is a concern for you, ask your pharmacist how you might reduce the cost of your medicines.

Should I see a doctor or nurse about my acid reflux? — Some people can manage their acid reflux on their own by changing their habits or taking nonprescription medicines. But you should see a doctor or nurse if:

- Your symptoms are severe or last a long time
- You cannot seem to control your symptoms
- You have had symptoms for many years

You should also see a doctor or nurse **right away** if you:

- Have trouble swallowing, or feel as though food gets "stuck" on the way down
- Lose weight when you are not trying to
- Have chest pain
- Choke when you eat
- Vomit blood or have bowel movements that are red, black, or look like tar

What if my child or teenager has acid reflux? — If your child or teenager has acid reflux, take him or her to see a doctor or nurse. Do not give your child medicines to treat acid reflux without talking to a doctor or nurse.

In children, acid reflux can be caused by a number of problems. It's important to have a doctor or nurse check for these problems before trying any treatments.

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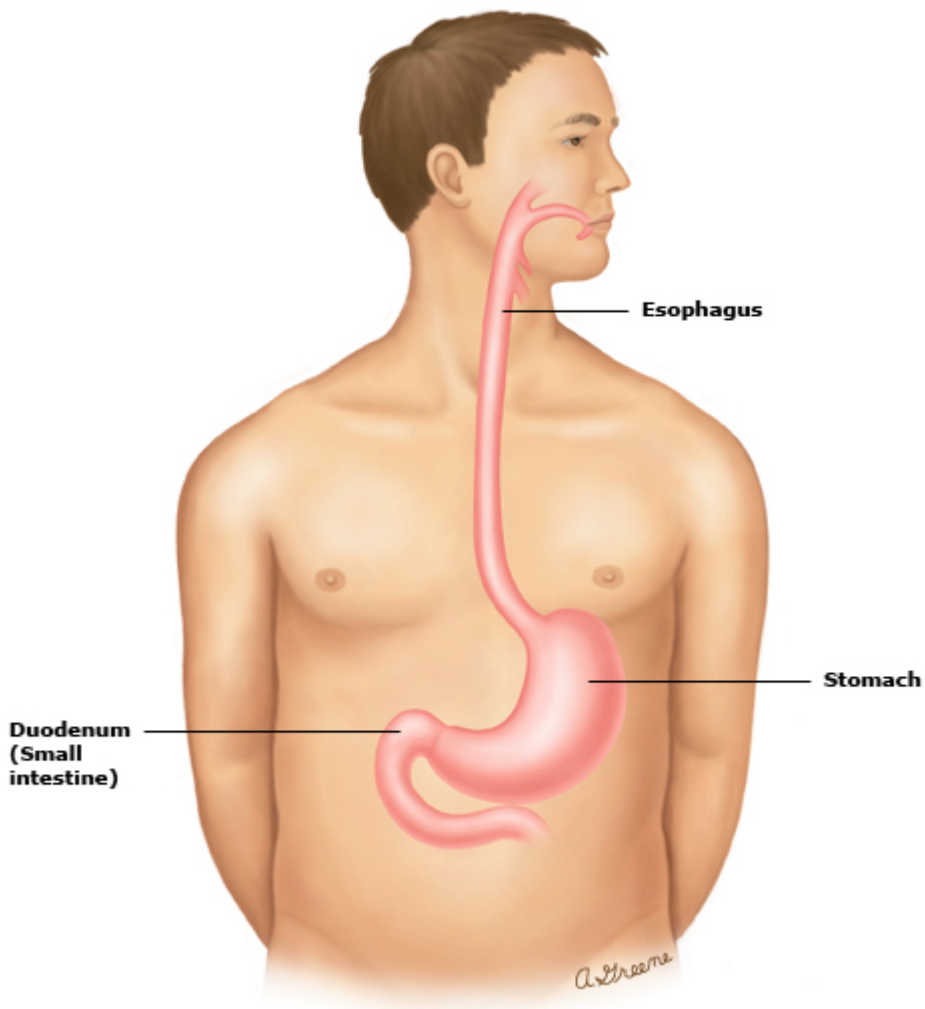
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GRAPHICS

Upper digestive tract



The upper digestive tract includes the esophagus (the tube than connects the mouth to the stomach), the stomach, and the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine).

Graphic 55616 Version 5.0

Medicines used to reduce stomach acid

| Medicine type | Medicine name examples |
|------------------------|--|
| Antacids* | Calcium carbonate (sample brand name: Tums) |
| | Aluminum hydroxide, magnesium hydroxide, and simethicone (sample brand name: Maalox) |
| Surface agents | Sucralfate (brand name: Carafate) |
| Histamine blockers | Ranitidine (brand name: Zantac) |
| | Famotidine (brand name: Pepcid) |
| | Cimetidine (brand name: Tagamet) |
| Proton pump inhibitors | Omeprazole (brand name: Prilosec) |
| | Esomeprazole (brand name: Nexium) |
| | Pantoprazole (brand name: Protonix) |
| | Lansoprazole (brand name: Prevacid) |
| | Dexlansoprazole (brand name: Dexilant) |
| | Rabeprazole (brand name: AcipHex) |

* Some antacids contain aspirin, which can increase the risk of internal bleeding. Examples of antacids with aspirin include Alka-Seltzer, Medi-Seltzer, and Neutralin. But there are others, too, so it's important to check labels. Talk to your doctor or nurse before taking any medicines that contain aspirin.