

Indigestion – patient information

Digestive complaints like indigestion (dyspepsia) and heartburn are very common. They're usually treatable with simple changes to your lifestyle and over-the-counter remedies. Symptoms usually affect the upper abdomen (the stomach, oesophagus or duodenum).

What are the symptoms of indigestion?

- pain or discomfort in the upper tummy (abdomen feeling bloated)
- Belching.
- Quickly feeling full after eating.
- Feeling sick (nausea).
- Being sick (vomiting).

Symptoms typically occur after meals.

What are the symptoms of heartburn?

- burning sensation in the middle of your chest
- unpleasant sour taste in your mouth, caused by stomach acid
- cough or hiccups that keep coming back
- hoarse voice
- bad breath
- bloating and feeling sick

Your symptoms will probably be worse after eating, when lying down and when bending over.

Some possible causes of indigestion and heartburn include:

- acid reflux from your stomach
- Stress
- inflammation of the gullet
- certain medicines (check the patient information leaflet)
- infection with a bug called helicobacter pylori (or H. pylori), or 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 gullet may be responsible.
- Sometimes, no underlying cause can be found (this is known as functional dyspepsia).

Tips for tackling heartburn and indigestion – self care

Taking care of your digestive system is a personal responsibility. In most cases self-care may be all you need.

Things you can do improve symptoms of indigestion and heartburn include:

- Make a note of any food or drink that seems to make your indigestion worse, and try to avoid them. This may mean eating less rich, spicy and fatty foods, and cutting down on drinks that contain caffeine, such as tea, coffee and cola.
- Avoiding anti-inflammatory pain killers, such as aspirin or ibuprofen, regularly, consult a health professional in case these could be the cause of the indigestion or heartburn.
- Avoid going to bed on a full stomach
- Losing weight if you are overweight
- Avoid stressful situations if you can and take up activities to help you to relax for example mindfulness, meditation, yoga or swimming
- Increasing exercise
- Stop smoking
- Reducing the amount of alcohol you drink
- For heartburn - raise 1 end of your bed 10 to 20cm by putting something under your bed or mattress – make it so your chest and head are above the level of your waist, so stomach acid does not travel up towards your throat

When should I seek medical help?

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

- Pain and other chest/stomach symptoms - You suffer from severe, persistent (longer than three 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 - You vomit blood or dark lumps (like ‘coffee grounds’).
- Dark stools - 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, weight loss for no apparent reason, or you notice a swelling or mass in your upper abdomen.

Treatments for treating indigestion and heartburn include are usually in the form of liquid medication or tablet.

You can buy these treatments from your pharmacy over the counter (OTC) or at the supermarket. Your pharmacist can advise you on which type of product is best for you.

Type of treatment	Example products – other brands are available	Other useful information
<p>Antacids, which neutralise acids in the stomach, can be used for immediate symptom relief. Antacids are best given when symptoms occur or are expected, usually between meals and at bedtime.</p>		<p>Calcium carbonate 500mg Can be purchased OTC for 12 years and over 1 to 2 tablets up to 3-4 times a day</p>
		<p>Calcium carbonate 800mg Can be purchased OTC for 12 years and over 1 to 2 up to 12 times a day</p>
<p>Alginates</p> <p>Alginate-containing preparations combine with bile and pepsin to form a “raft” that floats on top of the stomach contents, thereby reducing symptoms of gastro-oesophageal reflux. Different alginates maintain the raft formation for varying lengths of time, some lasting up to four hours.</p>		<p>Contains sodium alginate with calcium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate. Can be purchased OTC for 12 years and over. 5-10ml to be taken after meals and at bedtime.</p>
		<p>Contains sodium alginate with potassium bicarbonate. Can be purchased OTC for 12 years and over. 5-10ml to be taken after meals and at bedtime.</p>