

## **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
- Eat a bunch of small meals each day, rather than 2 or 3 big meals
- 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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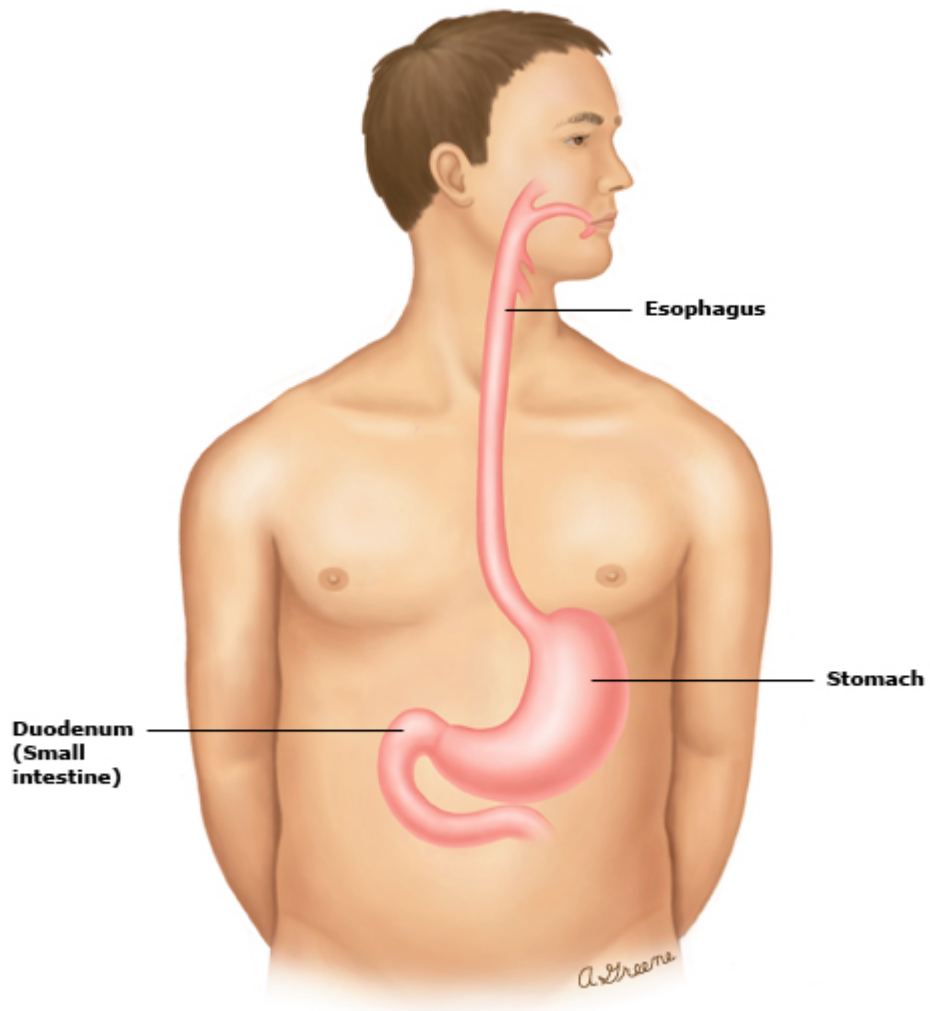
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## GRAPHICS

### Upper digestive tract

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## 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.

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