

Understanding Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

Gastroesophageal reflux occurs when contents in the stomach flow back into the esophagus. This happens when the valve between the stomach and the esophagus, known as the lower esophageal sphincter, does not close properly.

What are the symptoms of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease?

Common symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux disease are heartburn and/or acid regurgitation. Heartburn is a burning sensation felt behind the breast bone that occurs when stomach contents irritate the normal lining of the esophagus. Acid regurgitation is the sensation of stomach fluid coming up through the chest which may reach the mouth. Less common symptoms that may also be associated with gastroesophageal reflux include unexplained chest pain, wheezing, sore throat and cough, among others.

What causes Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease?

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) occurs when there is an imbalance between the normal defense mechanisms of the esophagus and offensive factors such as acid and other digestive juices and enzymes in the stomach. Often, the barrier between the stomach and the esophagus is impaired by weakening of the muscle (lower esophageal sphincter) or the presence of a hiatal hernia, where part of the stomach is displaced into the chest. Hiatal hernias, however, are common and not all people with a hiatal hernia have reflux.

How is Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease diagnosed?

Upper endoscopy is a test in which a small tube with a light at the end is used to examine the esophagus, stomach and duodenum (the first portion of the small intestine). Before this test, you will receive medications to help you relax and lessen any discomfort you may feel. An upper endoscopy allows your doctor to see the lining of the esophagus and detect any evidence of damage due to GERD.

Another test, known as pH testing, measures acid in the esophagus and can be done by either attaching a small sensor into the esophagus at the time of endoscopy or by placing a thin, flexible probe into the esophagus that will stay there for 24 hours while acid content is being measured. This information is transmitted to a small recorder that you wear on your belt.

How is Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease treated?

Reflux symptoms sometimes disappear if dietary or lifestyle excesses that cause the symptoms are reduced or eliminated. Propping up the head of the bed at night may be helpful.

Should symptoms persist, medications may be prescribed.

Surgery should be considered in patients with well-documented reflux disease who cannot tolerate medications or continue to have regurgitation as a primary symptom. If symptoms persist despite medical treatment, a comprehensive evaluation should be completed prior to

considering surgery. The surgery for treating reflux disease is known as fundoplication. In this procedure, a hiatal hernia, if present, is eliminated and part of the stomach is wrapped around the lower end of the esophagus to strengthen the barrier between the esophagus and the stomach. Due to the complexity of this surgery, it is important to seek a skilled surgeon who has experience in performing this procedure and can discuss the risks and benefits of the procedure.

This information is abbreviated version of the website: <https://www.asge.org/home/for-patients/patient-information/understanding-gastroesophageal-reflux-disease>