

This fact sheet helps you to know what is 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from heartburn or indigestion (also called dyspepsia). It also tells you when you should become concerned and when it is best to seek medical advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

Dyspepsia is common You are not alone. The symptoms in the upper abdomen described below may affect up to 4 out of 10 people in any one year.

How does it present? Heartburn and indigestion is often first noticed as burning pain or discomfort in the upper abdomen or chest. It can also create an unpleasant sour taste in your mouth, from stomach acid.

Timing Symptoms typically occur after meals and can be exacerbated when lying down or when bending over.

Other problems

Dyspepsia is commonly accompanied by belching, feeling bloated or sick, and experiencing coughs or hiccups that keep coming back.

What causes dyspepsia?

- ♦ Common causes include acid flushing back from your stomach up your food pipe, also referred to as the gullet or oesophagus, (acid reflux) and can be caused by certain foods and drinks, being overweight, smoking, stress, and pregnancy.
- ♦ It can also be caused by inflammation of the food pipe by certain medicines including ibuprofen (check the patient information leaflet), 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).

What can I expect to happen?

Duration Your symptoms will usually improve within one or two weeks. But if you find that you keep taking indigestion medicines all the time for several weeks or that your symptoms affect your day to day life, you need to consult your GP.

Effect of changing your diet In about 8 out of 10 people, symptoms will improve by making lifestyle changes alone, such as healthier eating and losing weight. Avoid fatty and fried meals and eating large meals within 3 to 4 hours before sleeping. Also try to avoid carbonated soft drinks, caffeine, and alcohol. Eat slowly and chew properly.

Medication If lifestyle changes alone don't work, you can expect your symptoms to improve by taking over-the-counter (OTC) or prescribed medication.

Investigations Most people do not need any tests. But if your symptoms are not controlled, or your GP suspects a particular underlying cause, you may need further testing. This could include looking into your gullet and stomach with a thin and flexible tube-like camera (called an endoscope) and blood or stool tests.

What can I do to get myself better - now and in the future?

Smoking Reduce or stop smoking, which may help improve your symptoms.

Over the counter medicines Various drugs that neutralise the acid in your stomach (antacids) as well as other drugs called H2-receptor antagonists and proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) are available without prescription over the counter at pharmacies, in petrol stations and in supermarkets. It is best not to take these medicines for prolonged periods without consulting a pharmacist or other health professional.

Avoiding aspirin-like drugs If you take OTC anti-inflammatory pain killers, such as aspirin or ibuprofen, regularly, consult a health professional in case these could be the cause of the indigestion.

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 last for most days for 3 weeks or they do not respond to treatment 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 (poo) 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.

Could it be Coronavirus?

Heartburn and indigestion are not the main symptoms of coronavirus, which are a high temperature, a new, continuous cough or a loss of, or change to, your sense of smell or taste. Go to the NHS 111 website if you have any of these symptoms or ring 111 if you are very unwell.

It's still important to get help from a GP if you need it. To contact your GP surgery

- visit their website
- use the NHS App
- call them

Find out about using the NHS during coronavirus:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/social-distancing/using-the-nhs-and-other-health-services/>

Where can I find out more?

NHS website (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/indigestion/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) has more information on how you can treat and prevent indigestion. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.