



3400-A Old Milton Pkwy • Ste 360 • Alpharetta GA 30005  
770-475-0077 • GeorgiaHormones.com

## **Restoring Digestive Health, GERD and Stomach Acid Production**

Robert P. Goldman, MD

After eating a big meal, many people suffer from indigestion or heartburn. The term, Gastro Esophageal Reflux Disease (GERD) has populated many TV advertisements and is popular among the medical lecture scene by pharmaceutical manufacturers. Medications such as Nexium esomeprazole, Prilosec omeprazole and Pepcid famotidine, are designed to stop the stomach from producing acid. These drugs were originally prescribed for short-term use for the treatment of a bleeding stomach and duodenal ulcers. Taking these medications to control heartburn symptoms has also become the norm. To stop the heartburn, doctors are taught to prescribe medications that keep the stomach from producing acid.

***However, the stomach is supposed to make acid.***

### **Why do we need stomach acid?**

Stomach acid is needed to properly break down protein and digest food. It kills many kinds of bacteria that are harmful to the human intestine. It is also needed to successfully absorb Vitamin B-12, calcium and other minerals.

### **Why do people get GERD?**

A traditional meal size is bigger than it has ever been. Overeating at just one meal sitting (especially at night) makes proper digestion more difficult. As we age, our gall bladders do not make as much bile compared to younger days. Bile is needed to digest fat and eating a meal high in fat, (especially beef and pork) slows down digestion, making it hard for the stomach to empty. As we grow older, the stomach may not produce as much digestive enzymes and stomach acid. The stomach will not pass what you have eaten through to the intestine until stomach digestion is complete. By eating bigger meals, we are asking our stomachs to do a bigger job, often reducing the ability to make enzymes and acid.

## **We are straining our aging stomachs**

There is a muscle band at the top of the stomach that tries to keep the acid from leaking back up into the esophagus. That muscle band can be paralyzed by too much caffeine, alcohol or emotional tension and stress. In addition, many people tend to eat late at night, frequently lying down with a full stomach of partially digested food. The acid will flow back up into the esophagus, causing heartburn or GERD.

## **Stomach acid and bacteria**

Uncooked foods, including salads, fruits and some shellfish, carry many species of bacteria. Some bacteria are beneficial and have little effect on our health. Saliva and stomach acid kill most of the bacteria that enters our mouth. A good bacteria strain known as acidophilus survives the acid in the stomach and grows in the intestine to better aid digestion. Even after rinsing raw vegetables in water, harmful soil bacteria can still remain, and is usually destroyed by stomach acid. Over time, people without stomach acid can develop abnormal bacterial soil colonies in their intestine. It can injure the intestinal lining and interfere with the digestion of proteins, which can result in multiple food allergies, cravings for carbohydrates and weight gain.

## **What other problems are caused by heartburn medications?**

The inability to make stomach acid is known as achlorhydria. Most achlorhydria is caused by chronic use of acid inhibiting drugs. These drugs were originally designed for short-term use to help heal stomach, intestinal and esophageal ulcers. This can lead to anemia, constipation and osteoporosis while the growth of abnormal bacteria in the intestine leads to abdominal bloating, gas and weight gain.

## **Weaning off GERD medications**

### **How to restore the digestive system**

Medications such as Nexium, Prilosec and Pepcid may help relieve the pain of acid reflux but does not address the underlying digestive problem that created the reflux. Normal digestion needs to be restored. Some recommendations on diet and supplements:

- Reduce the size of meals, especially at night. Most acid reflux starts with excessive eating habits. Stop eating at least two hours before bedtime.
- Avoid high fat meals, especially red meats, fried foods and high dairy fat products. Fat slows digestion and prolongs the time it takes for the stomach to empty.
- Reduce alcohol and caffeine consumption. For healing, both may need to be stopped entirely.
- Replacement digestive enzymes are available at health food stores and can be taken with each meal.
- Probiotic bacteria should be part of your daily vitamin and supplement routine. Taken regularly, it can help restore the normal bacterial balance in the intestine.

- Deglycyrrhizinated licorice and aloe vera are soothing for an injured esophagus.
- Herbal bitters such as angostura, are usually used in mixed drinks and can be purchased at liquor stores. Before meals, squirt a few drops of angostura into two tablespoons of water, stir and drink. This promotes normal, healthy production of stomach acid.
- Take Betaine Hydrochloride pills at every meal (or when eating large meals) as they promote digestion by releasing stomach acid. Available in health food stores, many people can benefit from digestive enzymes along with Betaine HCl.

These digestive aids can help you gradually wean off acid suppressing medications and restore digestive health. **Note:** *abrupt withdrawal can cause a rebound excess production, even to a severe level. Wean off of them slowly.*

### **Other recommendations**

1. Apply life style changes along with a regimen of digestive aids.
2. Reduce the dose of your prescription medication. Stay at the lower dose for at least two weeks before any further reduction.
3. If you are feeling good, without acid reflux, continue to reduce the dose or try taking it every other day. Stay with each reduction for at least two weeks before going lower.
4. Once you are completely off the medication, it is still OK to take your acid inhibiting medication for a few days if you have an episode of heartburn or esophagitis. Once you heal, stop the medication again.
5. If needed, you can take the digestive enzymes, probiotics, bitters and Betaine HCl for decades without suffering repercussions.

### **Shopping list (can purchase at health food stores or compounding pharmacies)**

- Refrigerated probiotics
- Digestive enzymes
- Deglycyrrhizinated licorice (DGL)
- Oral aloe vera

### **Optional**

- Angostura bitters (can buy at a liquor store)
- Betaine HCL