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Wolters Kluwer

# Patient education: Acid reflux and gastroesophageal reflux disease in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is acid reflux?

Acid reflux is when the acid that is normally in your stomach backs up into the esophagus. The esophagus is the tube that carries food from your mouth to your stomach ( [figure 1](#)).

When acid reflux causes bothersome symptoms or damage, doctors call it "gastroesophageal reflux disease" or "GERD."

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## What are the symptoms of acid reflux?

The most common symptoms are:

- Heartburn, which is a burning feeling in the chest
- Regurgitation, which is when acid and undigested food flow back into your throat or mouth

Other symptoms might include:

- Stomach or chest pain
- Trouble swallowing
- Having a raspy voice or a sore throat
- Unexplained cough
- Nausea or vomiting

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## Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better?

Yes. You might feel better if you:

- Lose weight (if you are overweight)
- Raise the head of your bed by 6 to 8 inches – You can do this by putting blocks of wood or rubber under 2 legs of the bed or a foam wedge under the mattress.
- Avoid foods that make your symptoms worse – For some people these include coffee, chocolate, alcohol, peppermint, and fatty foods.
- Stop smoking, if you smoke
- Avoid late meals – Lying down with a full stomach can make reflux worse. Try to plan meals for at least 2 to 3 hours before bedtime.
- Avoid tight clothing – Some people feel better if they wear comfortable clothing that does not squeeze the stomach area.

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## How is acid reflux treated?

There are a few main types of medicines that can help with the symptoms of acid reflux. The most common are antacids, 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.

- For mild symptoms, antacids can help, but they work only for a short time. Histamine blockers are stronger and last longer than antacids. You can buy antacids and most histamine blockers without a prescription.
- For frequent and more severe symptoms, proton pump inhibitors are the most effective medicines. Some of these medicines are sold without a prescription. But there are other versions that your doctor can prescribe.

Sometimes, medicines cost less if you get them with a doctor's prescription. Other times, non-prescription medicines cost less. If you are worried about cost, ask your pharmacist about ways to pay less for your medicines.

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## 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 non-prescription 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

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## What if my child or teenager has acid reflux?

If your child or teenager has acid reflux, take them 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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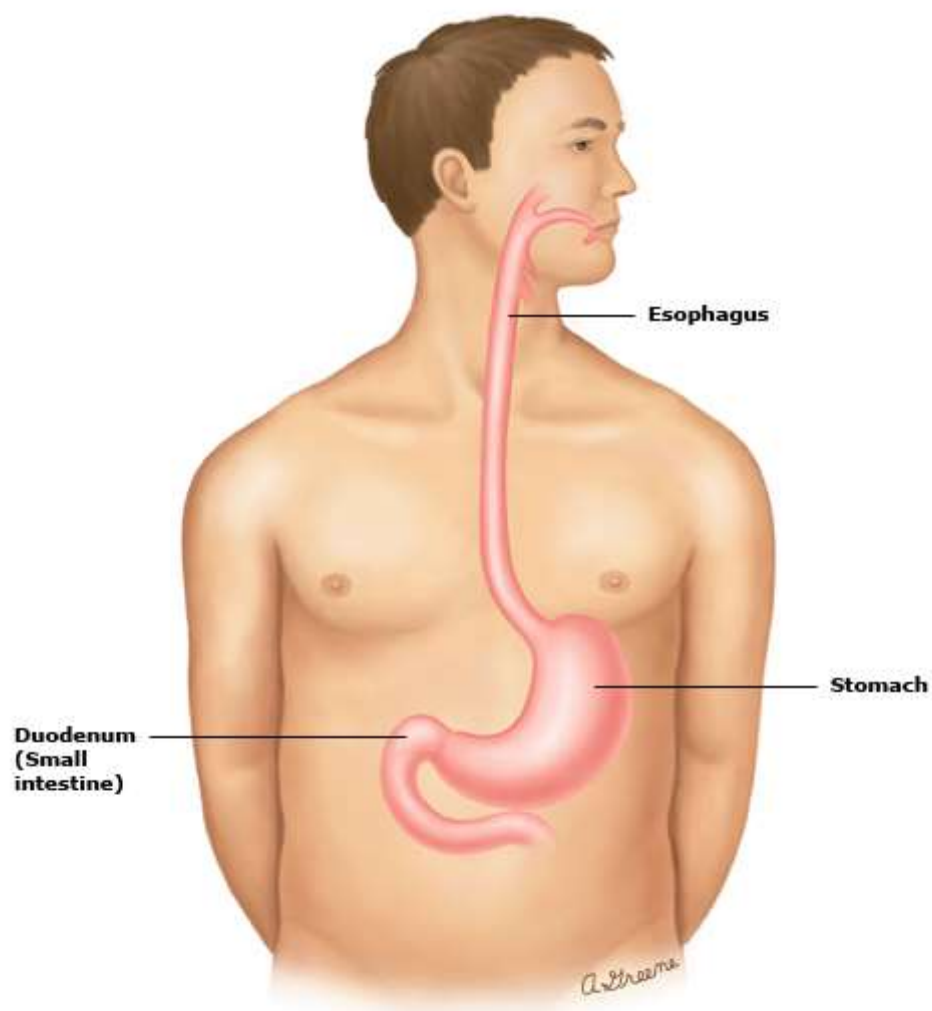
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## GRAPHICS

### Upper digestive tract



The upper digestive tract includes the esophagus (the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach), the stomach, and the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine).

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## Medicines that reduce or block stomach acid

Medicine type	Medicine name examples
Antacids*	Calcium carbonate (sample brand names: Maalox, Tums)
	Aluminum hydroxide, magnesium hydroxide, and simethicone (sample brand name: Mylanta)
Surface agents	Sucralfate (brand name: Carafate)
Histamine blockers¶	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.

¶ Another histamine blocker, ranitidine (brand name: Zantac), stopped being sold in 2020. That's because it was found to sometimes contain a substance that could increase a person's risk of cancer if they took a lot of it over time. If you have any of this medicine in your home, stop taking it and throw away any that is left over. Ask your doctor or nurse about what other medicine you should use instead.

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