

# GERD (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease)

## What is GERD?

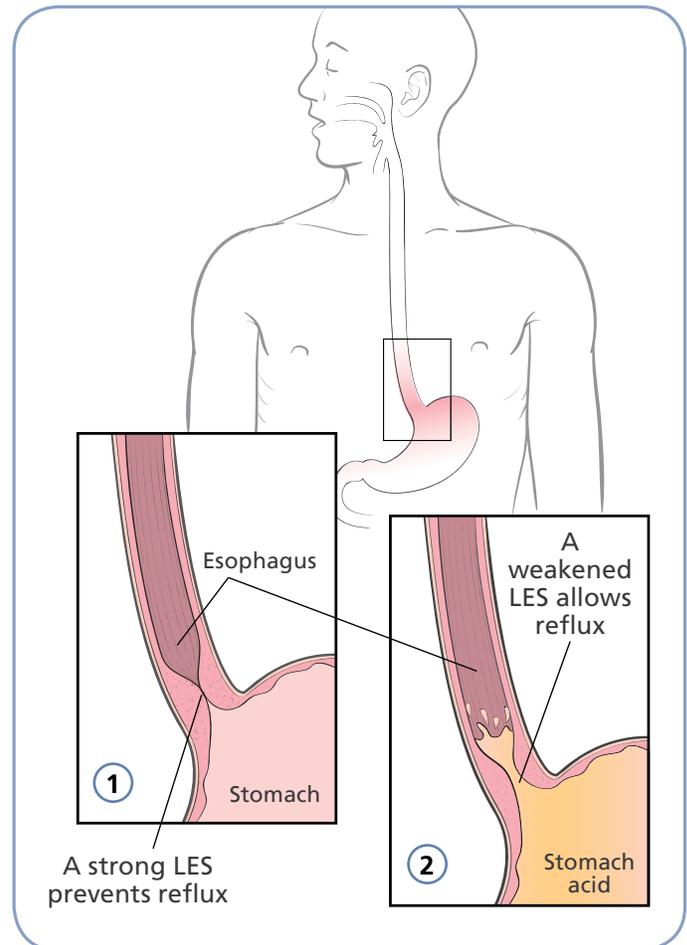
**GERD** is short for **gastroesophageal** [gas-troh-eh-sof-uh-GEE-uh] **reflux disease**. It is a common condition in which food and acids in the stomach move back (or **reflux**) into the esophagus. When reflux continues, GERD develops. Here's how reflux happens:

- 1 Normally when you swallow food**, it goes from your mouth, down your esophagus, and in to your stomach. As the food enters your stomach, it passes through a ring-shaped muscle called the **lower esophageal sphincter (LES)**. A strong and healthy LES opens to let food into the stomach and closes to prevent food and stomach acid from backing up.
- 2 When the LES muscle is weakened**, food and stomach acid can move back up into the esophagus and throat, causing **reflux**. Stomach acid from reflux can irritate the esophagus and cause heartburn, indigestion, and trouble swallowing.

## What causes GERD?

You are more likely to get GERD if you:

- Are overweight or obese
- Eat a high-fat diet
- Drink a lot of carbonated beverages such as soda pop and beer.
- Use alcohol
- Use tobacco products
- Have a hiatal hernia or damage to your esophagus



## How is GERD treated?

### Lifestyle changes

You can reduce the irritation of your esophagus and often even correct mild forms of GERD with a few lifestyle changes:

- **Don't lie down for 2 hours after eating.** Don't bend over at the waist either. Let gravity help your digestion.
- **Avoid foods that cause symptoms.** These include alcohol, coffee, fatty foods, spicy foods, chocolate, onions, tomato sauce, carbonated beverages, and mint.

- **Avoid wearing tight clothing** (such as belts, pants, or girdles).
- **Take an antacid** at bedtime and 30–60 minutes after each meal or as directed by your doctor.
- **Review all of your medicines** with your doctor, especially if you are taking sedatives, tranquilizers, and some types of blood pressure medicines.
- **Eat smaller meals** so your stomach isn't holding too much food at once.
- **Stop smoking**, or at least cut back. Ask your doctor for a copy of Intermountain's booklet, [Quitting Tobacco: Your Journey to Freedom](#), for tips and resources.
- **Lose extra weight.** Too much weight can put pressure on your stomach and cause reflux.



## What if I don't treat my GERD?

If you don't treat GERD, complications can occur. These include ulcers, bleeding, and **anemia** (a low number of red blood cells).

Over time, GERD can cause scarring and narrowing of the esophagus (stricture) making it difficult to swallow. It can also cause a condition called **Barrett's esophagus**, which is a serious change in the health of the cells lining the esophagus.

If you have symptoms of GERD, see your doctor. Treatment can usually prevent these complications.



### *When should I call my doctor?*

**Make an appointment to see your doctor** if you have these ongoing symptoms:

- Frequent heartburn or chest pain, especially when lying down
- Trouble swallowing
- Sour-tasting fluid backing up into your mouth
- Coughing a lot and over a long period of time
- Wheezing or hoarseness
- Symptoms that get worse when you eat, bend over, or lie down

**Call your doctor right away** if you have any of the symptoms listed below. These symptoms could indicate more serious medical problems such as a heart problem or an ulcer:

- Vomiting red blood, or vomit that looks like coffee grounds
- Passing black, tarry, or bloody stools
- Losing weight unexpectedly

## Medical treatment and tests

When GERD is moderate to severe, your doctor may recommend one or more of the following:

- **Prescription or over-the-counter medicines.** Your doctor may recommend an antacid or other medicine to control acid or to strengthen the LES. Be sure to take your medicines regularly and just as your doctor prescribes.
- **Endoscopy.** This procedure allows the doctor to view the inside of your esophagus with a camera to identify and sometimes treat any problems.
- **Dilation.** This procedure is done during an endoscopy. It stretches your esophagus if it's constricted.

## Surgery

If other treatments don't relieve your GERD, your doctor may recommend surgery to tighten the LES.

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