

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)

Many people experience episodes of heartburn from time to time. When the symptoms are frequent and occur on a regular basis it can develop into GERD.

What is it: GERD, Gastroesophageal reflux disease, is a digestive disorder that affects the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), the ring of muscle between the esophagus and stomach.

Who is at risk: Conditions such as obesity, hiatal hernias, pregnancy, smoking, asthma, diabetes, delayed stomach emptying and connective tissue disorders can all increase your risk of GERD.

Cause: GERD occurs when a weakness or defect in the LES allows stomach acid or contents to flow back into the esophagus which irritates the lining of your esophagus.

Symptoms: A burning sensation in your chest (heartburn), sometimes spreading to your throat, along with a sour taste in your mouth. Other symptoms can include chest pain, difficulty swallowing, dry cough, hoarseness or sore throat.

How is it diagnosed: GERD can be diagnosed by its characteristic heartburn symptom. An Endoscopy is useful in viewing the esophagus for inflammation or ulcers.

Complications: GERD can damage cells in the lower esophagus leading to scar tissue and difficulty swallowing. Barrett's esophagus is changes to the tissue lining and is considered precancerous changes. Sometimes the stomach acid can erode the lining to the esophagus causing ulcers which may bleed, cause pain and make swallowing difficult.

Home Treatment: The simplest treatment for GERD includes lifestyle changes particularly related to eating habits. Patients also benefit from taking medications such as antacids, H-2 receptor blockers such as Tagamet HB, Pepcid AC and Zantac. Avoiding chocolate, peppermint, citrus drinks, alcohol, fatty foods and caffeinated drinks can reduce the symptoms of GERD. Stopping smoking is beneficial. Propping the head of the bed can be helpful.

Did you know? Techniques to calm stress and anxiety may reduce signs and symptoms of GERD

Triage Nurses should be cognizant that anyone, including infants and children can have GERD. In infants the main symptom may be excessive crying or spitting up after eating. When triaging adults with heartburn type symptoms it is important to gather a Past Medical History to ascertain if the patient has experienced similar symptoms in the past or is under treatment for GERD. The nurse should never assume that heartburn is GERD, any pain between the naval and throat is considered Chest pain and should be triaged as so to rule out the symptoms being cardiac in nature.

Sources: www.mayoclinic.com

www.medlineplus.gov

www.webmd.com