

Article date: 2016

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Heart Burn, Gastritis, GERD, and Silent Reflux

The FDA is considering adding another health risk warning to PPI prescriptions. PPIs or Proton Pump Inhibitors such as Nexium, Prilosec, Dexilant, and Protonix, are drugs that suppress the production of acid in the stomach. They're used to treat heart burn, gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining), gastric esophageal reflux disease (GERD) and laryngeal pharyngeal reflux, also known as "silent reflux". Silent reflux often causes feelings of a thickness in the throat and a nagging cough. As prescribed, they are intended for short term symptom relief, but many people are kept on them for years.

The most recent PPI warning is that they increase the risk of community acquired pneumonia. It is already known that patients taking PPIs are more susceptible to diarrhea caused by C.difficile infection. Also PPIs interfere with calcium absorption; increase bone loss and can cause magnesium deficiency.

The stomach is normally supposed to be very acidic at a pH 1.5 to 3.5. The stomach's hydrochloric acid not only is essential to digesting proteins and for the absorption of many minerals and vitamins, but also helps to destroy ingested bacteria, viruses and parasites. We actually have white blood cells in the stomach that release histamine on contact with these germs and allergens. The increased histamine in turn stimulates more hydrochloric acid production in the stomach to digest these pathogens away. It has been noted that more patients complain of heart burn and reflux during high histamine allergy seasons. Certain foods contain histamine, such as champagne, sauerkraut, tofu, blue cheese, red wine, eggplant and ketchup, while other foods stimulate histamine release, such as strawberries, pineapple, bananas, peanuts, nuts and chocolate. Patients are often told to avoid these foods as they may also contribute to GERD.

Healing the stomach and balancing its function to address heart burn, gastritis, GERD and silent reflux, involves more than just suppressing hydrochloric acid. Some simple measures to take include sleeping on your left side helps the stomach to empty but it's still best not to eat for 3 hours before bed. In addition, sometimes sleeping on a foam wedge (available at Bed, Bath and Beyond) can help reduce after hours reflux. Chewing gum, preferably a xylitol gum such as "Spry", after a meal, can help neutralize after meal stomach acidity. Figure out which foods really crank up your acid because it's not the same for everyone and why avoid all of those foods above if you don't have to.

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Don't wear Spanx, control top jeans, or tight belts when you're eating a big meal because this pushes the stomach towards your esophagus and allows stomach acid to bump up more. When bending over from standing, bend your knees and exhale, again to prevent elevating your stomach and acid. By the way, doing this also helps protect your low back.

Addressing heart burn, gastritis, GERD, and silent reflux requires proper diagnosis and checking for Helicobacter Pylori, usually by having an endoscopy. Treating these conditions varies for each individual but often involves addressing allergies, improving digestion, weight loss, stress management and other life style changes. There are specific herbs and supplements like deglycyrrhizinated licorice, slippery elm, and quercetin that can help treat gastritis but again, discuss this with your physician to determine what's appropriate for you. PPIs may be appropriate for short term treatment of episodic or severe GERD and silent reflux with a goal of weaning off them when the cause has resolved. Discontinuing PPIs often causes a temporary rebound hyperacidity of the stomach that can mislead some patients that they need to stay on the drugs. This is another situation when natural medicines can be taken to transition off a medication.