

Choosing Wisely[®]

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Treating heartburn and GERD

Hearthburn is a feeling of burning pain in the pit of your stomach or your lower chest. It comes from acid backing up from your stomach into your throat. You may have seen ads for heartburn drugs, such as Nexium, Prilosec, or Prevacid. These drugs are called PPIs (proton pump inhibitors). They keep the stomach from making too much acid. They have been shown to heal irritation of the tube between the throat and the stomach (the esophagus).

In most cases, you don't need a PPI for heartburn. You can get relief from a less powerful drug. And when you do need a PPI, you should take the lowest dose for as short a time as possible. Here's why:

You may not need a PPI.

More than half of the people who take PPIs probably do not need them. Simple heartburn can be treated with antacids or other drugs, plus diet and lifestyle changes.

You may only have heartburn every now and then—such as after a big, spicy meal. This may be uncomfortable, but it is not serious. You can usually get relief from an antacid, like Roloids or Tums, or an H2 blocker, such as Pepcid AC or Zantac.

PPIs have risks.

If you need a PPI, taking a low dose for less than a year is probably safe. PPIs are expensive and have been linked to higher risk of some problems. Talk with your doctor before taking them for longer than two weeks. Be sure



you have a good reason to take the PPI, and take it for the shortest time possible.

Some risks of taking a PPI for a year or longer include:

- Higher risk of certain fractures.
- Higher risk of kidney disease, or kidney disease that gets worse.
- A higher risk of heart attack.
- In people age 75 and older, a higher risk of dementia.
- Trouble absorbing calcium and vitamin B12.
- Low levels of magnesium in your blood.
- Pneumonia.
- An infection in the intestines called *Clostridium difficile*.

PPIs can change the way other drugs work.

PPIs interact with some common prescription drugs. For example, some PPIs can reduce the blood-thinning effect of the drug Plavix (generic clopidogrel), according to the US Food and Drug Administration. This can increase the risk of heart attack and even death. If you take Plavix, talk to your doctor about whether you should take a PPI.

PPIs cost more.

Why spend more money on a PPI unless antacids or H2 blockers don't work? Both the prescription and over-the-counter versions of PPIs are usually more expensive than antacids and H2 blockers. If you are worried about cost, talk to your doctor. He or she can help you find the least expensive medicine that will work for you.

When should you consider a PPI?

Talk to your doctor if you have symptoms such as trouble swallowing, weight loss, or chest pain. Call the doctor if you don't get better in about two weeks. The doctor will look for signs of problems such as GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease).

If you have GERD, you probably need a PPI. Talk to your doctor if:

- You have heartburn at least twice a week for several weeks.
- Food or acid come back up into your throat.
- You take antacid or H2 blockers, and you make changes like the ones described on this page, but your heartburn does not go away.

If your doctor thinks you need a PPI:

- Ask to start with a low dose of generic prescription lansoprazole or omeprazole. You can also get these medicines over the counter.
- If the heartburn gets better after a few weeks, talk to your doctor about gradually lowering your dose.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Ease heartburn without drugs

Many people who have heartburn don't need drugs at all. They can feel better by making changes in their diet and lifestyle. Try these things before you try drugs:

Watch what you eat.

Try to figure out which foods and beverages give you heartburn. Then try to avoid them. Foods and drinks that may cause heartburn include:

- Alcohol
- Fried foods
- Spicy foods
- Garlic and onions
- Oranges and other citrus fruits
- Chocolate and peppermint
- Coffee and other drinks with caffeine, such as Coke
- Foods with a lot of tomatoes, such as pizza, salsa, and red pasta sauce



Eat smaller meals and do not go to bed right after you eat. Do not overload your stomach. And avoid lying down for three hours after you eat.

Stop smoking. If you need a reason to stop smoking, heartburn may be it. Research shows that smoking raises your risk for heartburn and GERD.

Lose extra weight. It has been proven that losing just a few extra pounds can help lessen the effects of heartburn and GERD.

Loosen up. Don't wear tight clothes or tight belts that press on your middle. The extra pressure can make heartburn worse.

Sleep with your head raised. Raise your upper body with pillows. Or raise the head of your bed about six to eight inches. Try putting wooden blocks under the legs at the head of the bed.