

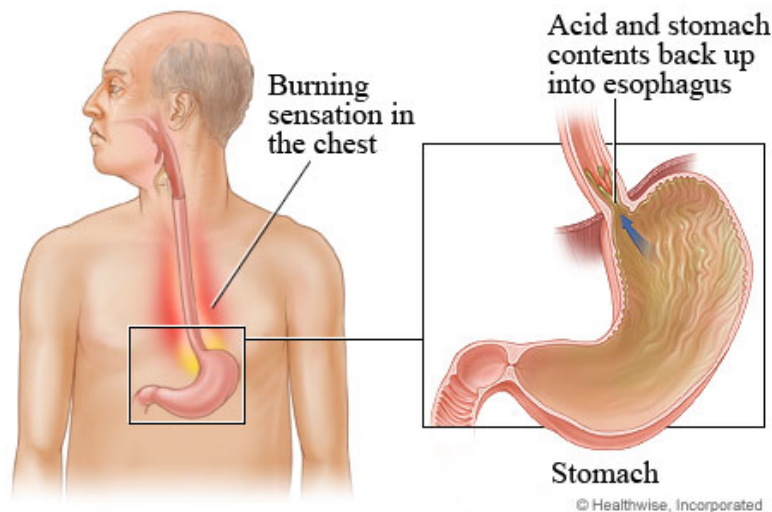
Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title: Does having heartburn mean I need a camera down my throat?!?

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Plain Language Summary:

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is a common problem. Most people know GERD as heartburn. What exactly does GERD mean? Well, in medicine, the word “gastro” means stomach. Your esophagus is the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach. Reflux describes fluid going the wrong way. So, GERD means fluid flowing from your stomach into your esophagus, which is the wrong way!



Picture from: <http://www.tigerlim.com/2011/04/gerd.html>

The fluid is acid. Acid in your stomach helps break down your food. Your stomach has a protective coat, so acid does not harm it. Your esophagus is not supposed to touch the acid. It has no coat to protect itself. People with GERD, then, have pain when reflux occurs. This pain often feels like burning. The pain is usually felt in the chest. Some people feel like their heart is hurting when reflux happens. That is why they call it heartburn! Some people with reflux have a metal taste in their mouth. Some people feel a lump in their throat, like their food is stuck there. Others have a cough, a hoarse voice, or a sore throat.

Here are some things that cause or worsen reflux:

- Big meals
- Spicy foods
- Coffee or other caffeinated drinks
- Chocolate
- Eating less than 3 hours before bedtime or lying down
- Drinking alcohol
- Smoking
- Being overweight
- Being pregnant

If you think you have GERD, visit your doctor. When you see the doctor, he/she will ask you many questions. Some important questions may be:

- Have you recently loss weight without trying?
- Do you ever have trouble swallowing?
- Have you thrown up blood?
- Have you had black stools?
- Have you felt more tired recently?

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, the doctor may want to run some tests. One test involves putting you to sleep and then using a camera to see inside you mouth, throat, esophagus and stomach. The doctor does this to make sure that your insides are healthy. In some people with GERD, the refluxed acid harms the esophagus and causes changes in the cells. These changes are usually not a problem. In rare cases, though, the cells change into cancer. Of course, this is very worrisome! Using the camera helps to find any changes in the cells. If there are changes, the doctor will make a plan with you to treat the problem.

If you answered “no” to all the questions above, then it is very unlikely that you have worrisome changes in your cells. The doctor will most likely just give you some medication to reduce the acid in your stomach. He/she may have to increase the amount of medication you take over the first few months. If the medication does not make your symptoms better, you may need the camera test. If your symptoms do get better, but your answer to the above questions ever changes to “yes,” go back to the doctor! At that time, you may need to have the camera test.

Additional Resources:

For more information on GERD, visit these websites:

MedlinePlus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/gerd.html>

PubMed Health

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0001311/>

The Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/gerd/DS00967>

WebMD

<http://www.webmd.com/heartburn-gerd/default.htm>

Key Words:

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (Heartburn)

Endoscopy (Camera Test)

Dysphasia (Trouble Swallowing)

Barrett (Cell Changes)

Esophageal Adenocarcinoma (Cancer)

This document was created by a medical student enrolled in the Family Medicine Clerkship at the University of Minnesota Medical School as part of the course project. The aim of the project is to present information on a medical topic in the format of a patient education handout. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Minnesota Medical School physicians and faculty. These materials are provided for informational purposes only and are in no way intended to take the place of the advice and recommendations of your personal health care provider. The information provided may no longer be up-to-date since it has not been reviewed since the date of creation. The information provided should not be used to diagnose a health problem or disease, or as a means of determining treatment. In the event of a medical emergency, immediately contact a doctor or call 911.