

ESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE

HOW DOES THE ESOPHAGUS FUNCTION?

The esophagus is a straight, tubular organ that transports food from the throat to the stomach by coordinated muscular contraction called peristalsis. A muscle at the lower end of the esophagus relaxes to admit food into the stomach, and later contracts to prevent stomach juices from entering the esophagus (reflux), where these juices may cause inflammation, often sensed as heartburn. This special muscle is called the *lower esophageal sphincter* (LES).

WHAT IS ESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE?

This is a common condition in which the lower esophageal sphincter is weak, or relaxes inappropriately. Stomach juice can then reflux into the esophagus to cause inflammation and symptoms. Reflux is greatest after meals and when lying down or bending over. Sometimes doctors refer to this condition as **Hiatus Hernia** because part of the stomach “herniates” into the chest cavity. However, it is the weakness of the lower esophageal sphincter, rather than the hiatus hernia, which is the problem.

Although most patients are easily treated, some patients have persistent esophagitis symptoms and/or develop complications of: 1) Esophageal ulceration – constant chest or upper back pain, often with swallowing; 2) Esophageal stricture – scar tissue causes food to lodge or stick in the esophagus; 3) Bleeding – vomiting blood or passing dark or tar-like blood in the stool; 4) Barrett’s esophagus – a change in the lining of the esophagus that raises long-term risk of esophagus cancer; 5) Asthma – and/or chronic cough; 6) Laryngitis.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO FEEL WELL?

1. **Change your diet habits.** Eat smaller meals. Avoid citrus foods, tomatoes, chocolate, candies, peppermints, alcoholic beverages, all carbonated beverages, all fatty foods, and tea and coffee – whether decaffeinated or not. If you want to eat “greasy foods”, do so earlier in the daytime.
2. **Stop smoking.** The nicotine and other substances in cigarettes weaken the sphincter muscle further.
3. **Use gravity to your advantage.** Elevate the head of your bed 6 to 8 inches. Avoid bending over or lying down after eating.
4. **Abdominal pressure aggravates reflux.** Reduce weight – if you are overweight. Avoid tight belts or girdles.
5. **NO bedtime snacks.** Even a glass of milk will cause more acid to be made while you are asleep.
6. **Use antacids.** One hour after meals and at bedtime or more often, as needed or prescribed by your doctor.

If you have any further questions,
Please call us at (425) 259-3122