

Acid Reflux and Naturopathic Medicine

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald, N.D.

One of the most common conditions I see in my natural family practice is acid reflux or heartburn. Not surprisingly, antacid preparations, both prescription and over the counter are one of the top sellers in the pharmaceutical industry. I am very concerned about the effect on digestion that these drugs have and by the fact that they only address the symptom, without addressing the cause. It gives me great satisfaction to help someone with acid reflux understand what is causing their symptoms and give them natural medicines and lifestyle changes to solve the problem.

The stomach produces hydrochloric acid for a good reason. Stomach acid helps kill any bacteria or parasites being ingested along with the food. Secondly it activates the enzyme pepsin needed for protein digestion. Thirdly, the acidic pH of the stomach contents signals to the pancreas to put out its digestive juices and enzymes to further break down food. Fourthly, stomach acid helps initiate the rhythmic contractions of the intestines, that crush and move the food down the intestines.

When antacid drugs are used, digestion is impaired, causing improper breakdown of food and therefore reduced absorption of nutrients. Stagnant food can create fullness, bloating, gas, cramps, constipation or diarrhea. I have had many patients whose digestive symptoms have gotten worse when taking these drugs, not a surprise when you understand the importance of stomach acid.

The stomach has a unique ability to handle very acidic contents. The lining of the stomach, called the gastric mucosa is a tough mucous membrane that can ideally withstand the high acidity needed in the stomach. Only

when the gastric mucosa is weakened will it be irritated by its acid. The esophagus on the other hand, cannot withstand acidity and will let you know if it is being exposed to acid! Acid reflux is most often not an issue of too much stomach acid, it is an issue of stomach acid being in the wrong place - the esophagus.

In fact many people naturally don't have enough stomach acid - especially as they age. It is estimated that only 40% of people produce adequate hydrochloric acid (HCl) in the stomach, where protein digestion takes place, and as we age, our production of hydrochloric acid declines. Fewer than half of men and women over 60 actually have enough HCl to initiate protein digestion. Without enough stomach acid, digestion is stalled. Taking acid blocking drugs just compounds the problem. Symptoms of low stomach acid are fullness and belching after eating, bloating, flatulence and lower bowel problems.

Acid reflux can certainly be caused by other factors. Many people have heard of common triggers like the following but I always wonder what factors underlie a sensitivity to normal foods.

Common triggers:

- Obesity
- Carbonated drinks
- Cigarette smoking
- Alcohol
- Chocolate
- Coffee
- Fried foods
- Spicy foods
- Fatty foods
- Citrus foods
- Tomato based foods

Common Triggers continued:

Tight waist bands
Anti-inflammatory drugs
Overeating
Pregnancy

For many of my patients, the identification and elimination of their individual food allergies has provided long term relief from not only acid reflux but many other digestive disorders. For instance, Carlos, a 55 year old man with a 15 year history of reflux, was able to get off his Pantoloc (antacid drug) and live symptom free as long as he avoided wheat and sugar. He never dreamed that there could be such a simple solution to this long-term problem.

Another avenue to explore is the relationship between the gall bladder and acid reflux. If the liver is toxic or overwhelmed by hormones, the bile it makes can become caustic and irritating. When the gallbladder squeezes out its bile to help with fat digestion, that bile can irritate the tissues in or near the stomach. The stomach, being a muscular organ, only knows one way to get your attention that it is being aggravated; it contracts. The contractions push the acidic stomach contents into the esophagus, creating the symptoms of acid reflux.

The naturopathic medical approach focuses on removing any of the causative factors that are irritating the upper digestive system. I also promote healthy breakdown and assimilation of foods and assist healing of the irritated tissues. Under naturopathic care, the road to health starts with:

1. A thorough consultation, medical history, and physical exam
2. An evaluation of food allergies
3. Individual dietary coaching
4. Recommendations on the use of safe, natural medicines

A life free of pain and free of dependency on symptom blocking drugs is a goal that can be attained following this safe, commonsense approach.

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