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Gastroesophageal Reflux, or GERD, also known as acid reflux, is a chronic illness that affects 5-7% of the world population and is associated with serious medical complications if untreated. Many people with GERD also experience nighttime heartburn. Adults who experience nighttime heartburn are likely to have symptoms of sleep problems/disorders such as insomnia, sleep apnea, daytime sleepiness and restless legs syndrome than those who don't have nighttime heartburn.

GERD is caused by a backflow of acid from the stomach into the esophagus. Most people with GERD experience an increase in the severity of symptoms (usually heartburn or coughing and choking) while sleeping or attempting to sleep. If the acid backs up as far as the throat, the sleeper will wake up coughing and choking. If the acid only backs up as far as the esophagus the symptom is usually experienced as heartburn.

Most people refer to GERD as heartburn, although you can have it without heartburn. Sometimes GERD can cause serious complications including inflammation of the esophagus from stomach acid that causes bleeding or ulcers. In a small number of people, GERD has been reported to result in a condition called Barrett's esophagus, which over time can lead to cancer.

GERD is common and may be frequently overlooked in children. It can cause repeated vomiting, coughing, and other respiratory problems. Talk to your child's doctor if the problem occurs regularly and causes discomfort.

Why Do We Get GERD?

No one knows why people get GERD but factors that may contribute to it include:

- age
- diet
- alcohol use
- obesity
- pregnancy
- smoking

Also, certain foods can be associated with reflux events, including:

- citrus fruits
- chocolate
- drinks with caffeine
- fatty and fried foods
- garlic and onions

- mint flavorings
- spicy foods
- tomato-based foods, like spaghetti sauce, chili, and pizza

What Are the Symptoms of GERD?

The most frequently reported symptoms of GERD are:

- Heartburn
- Acid regurgitation
- Inflammation of the gums
- Erosion of the enamel of the teeth
- Bad breath
- Belching
- Chronic sore throat

How is GERD Diagnosed?

Some patients with GERD experience no symptoms at all. Because of the wide range of symptoms associated with GERD and the need to distinguish it from heart-related problems, the number of medical visits and tests needed to diagnose or rule out the disease tends to be quite high.

Diagnostic tools include upper GI x-ray, endoscopy, and/or 24-hour acid test.

What is the Treatment for GERD?

GERD is a recurrent and chronic disease that does not resolve itself. If you are diagnosed with GERD, there are several methods of treatment which your doctor will discuss with you including behavioral modifications, medications, surgery, or a combination of methods. Over-the-counter medications may provide temporary relief but will not prevent symptoms from recurring.

The lifestyle changes you can make to minimize GERD include avoiding fats, onions, chocolate and alcohol. Losing weight may also help alleviate GERD symptoms.

Because of the association between GERD and sleep apnea, people with nighttime GERD symptoms should be screened and evaluated for sleep apnea.

How Can I Cope With GERD?

Certain lifestyle modifications may help minimize reflux:

- Eat smaller meals and maintain an upright, relaxed posture

- Avoid fats, onions, chocolate and alcohol
- Avoid potassium supplements
- Always swallow medication in the upright position and wash it down with lots of water

- Do not eat for 2 hours prior to going to sleep.
- Do not lie down after meals.
- Raise the head of your bed by 4 inches – use bricks or wooden blocks under the feet of the headboard.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Eat smaller meals.
- Limit the amount of fatty food you eat.
- Reduce the amount of caffeine in your diet.
- Give up smoking.