

Living With Acid Reflux During the Holidays

Once the turkey is carved and the pumpkin pie has been savored, many of us are stricken with a distinct discomfort in our bellies or chest during the holidays. What you are probably feeling is called acid reflux, also known as GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). Acid reflux is a common and chronic digestive condition caused by a weakened lower esophageal sphincter (the valve between the stomach and esophagus) that allows stomach acid to back up into the esophagus.



How do you know if you have acid reflux?

Heartburn is the number one symptom of acid reflux. If you have a burning feeling in your chest or a sour taste in your mouth, chances are good you are suffering from acid reflux. Other symptoms can include excessive belching, chest pain, problems swallowing, a sore throat, a chronic dry cough, wheezing, a feeling like something is lodged in your throat upon awakening, and foul or bitter-smelling breath.

What causes acid reflux?

There are a variety of reasons for acid reflux, and the holidays and big family meals tend to exacerbate many of the causes. Some of the primary causes are:

- Consuming higher levels of fatty and caffeinated foods
- Obesity
- Smoking
- Increased alcohol usage
- Certain medications (antihistamines, calcium channel blockers)
- Excessive amounts of stomach acid
- Hiatal hernia
- Abnormal contractions in the esophagus or dysfunction in the sphincter muscle of the esophagus



Triggers for acid reflux

Certain foods and drinks can trigger the symptoms and severity of acid reflux for holiday revelers. The main triggers are:

- **Overeating.** By far the #1 trigger of acid reflux is overeating. We all do it and it causes the stomach to stretch and the sphincter muscle in the esophagus to relax. Even people with no history of acid reflux may experience it when overeating.
- **Caffeine.** It's a classic aggravating cause of reflux.
- **Greasy and fatty foods.** Too much fat slows the process of food digesting and exiting the stomach. If it does not empty, it backs up in the esophagus. Limit intake of foods like gravy and stuffing.
- **Wine.** Red and white wines have been shown to increase reflux symptoms. Both types are very acidic and can

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decrease lower esophageal sphincter (valve) pressures predisposing to acid reflux. Since we tend to consume more alcohol during the holidays this can be a classic trigger.

- **Time of day you eat.** Eating shortly before bed or nap time, especially fatty foods, may cause reflux. When you lie down the natural barrier created by gravity is eliminated, making it easier for stomach contents or acid to back up into the esophagus. Try to eat at least three to four hours before bedtime and if possible take a short walk after dinner.
- **Snack foods.** Crunchy chips that we typically munch on during the holidays can be a source of extra fat and calories.



Foods to avoid when controlling acid reflux

Certain foods aggravate and contribute to heartburn, so knowing which foods to avoid may help prevent or reduce the symptoms of a flare-up:

- Certain fruits and juices: orange juice, tomato juice, cranberry juice, grapefruit juice, lemons or lemonade
- Certain vegetables: french fries, fried okra, fried onions
- Fatty meats: sausage, ground beef, fried chicken, buffalo wings
- Dairy: sour cream, ice cream, cottage cheese
- Alcohol: liquor, wine, beer
- Caffeinated liquids: coffee, tea, soft drinks, energy drinks
- Salad dressings
- Fatty foods and snacks: chips, doughnuts, chocolate, butter cookies

Foods to eat in moderation

- Low acid orange juices, berries of any kind, peaches, apple cider, grapes
- Garlic, cooked onions, leeks, scallions
- Lean ground beef, scrambled eggs, fried fish, tuna salad, hot dogs, ham
- Yogurt, low-fat milk, low-fat cottage cheese, cheddar and mozzarella cheese
- Garlic bread, granola cereal
- Beer, cola
- Ketchup
- Low-fat cookies



Safe foods to enjoy that will not aggravate acid reflux

- Apples and bananas
- Baked potatoes (skip the fatty fixings)
- Broccoli, cabbage, carrots, green beans, peas

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- Extra lean beefs, skinless chicken breast, egg whites, fish
- Low-fat feta or goat cheese, fat-free cream cheese and sour cream
- Multi grain breads, bran and oatmeal, pretzels, rice
- Mineral waters
- Fat-free cookies, raisins, apricots

How to treat acid reflux

If avoiding the above triggers (overeating, caffeine, greasy and fatty foods, alcohol, late eating, crunchy snack foods) don't relieve your symptoms, it's time to talk to your doctor. There are different methods to treat acid reflux based on the severity:

- If your symptoms are not too pronounced, over the counter medications may be enough to combat the problem. Antacids are a popular option but they also are short lived. Some antacids to try are Tums, Gaviscon, Mylanta, Rolaids and Maalox.
- The second line of defense may be another group of medications called histamine 2-receptor antagonists. They include medications such as Pepcid, Axid, Tagamet or Zantac. These can be longer lasting but still offer only modest relief for many patients.
- The most effective medications to combat acid reflux are proton pump inhibitors. An over-the-counter example is Prilosec. Your doctor may recommend a prescription strength option that might not work as quickly as the above options, but will be most effective in battling the symptoms of acid reflux.
- Keep in mind that patients with a long history of poorly-controlled acid reflux or difficulty swallowing generally need medical attention and should seek physician care.

Quick tips for battling holiday heartburn

- Eat smaller meals.
- Limit the fatty and acid producing foods.
- Don't let stress take you down!
- Wear loose fitting clothes.
- Elevate your head when sleeping.
- Wait two to three hours after eating before sleeping.
- Eat balanced meals.
- Maintain a healthy weight.

While acid reflux can be a serious discomfort for many holiday revelers, there's no reason it should prohibit you from enjoying the season and all it has to offer. Follow the above tips or talk to your doctor and you will be prepared for a reflux free holiday!

