

Lifewire: Holidays could ring in 'heartburn season'

by Ven Griva

Apparently an abundance of rich foods during the holiday season poses problems for more than just our waistlines. Overindulgence could turn the yuletide into heartburn season for many Americans.

Making merry is often synonymous with overindulging - whether from holiday feasts or rich desserts or alcoholic beverages. Heartburn is often marked by a characteristic burning sensation that sufferers describe as rolling up into their chest.

"Most of the time heartburn is a nuisance, not a tremendous threat to your health," said Dr. Stuart Spechler, professor of internal medicine in digestive and liver diseases at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. "I tell most of my patients that it's going to be a trade-off - is the food going to taste good enough to suffer through the heartburn?"

POUND OF PREVENTION

"If you know you're going to eat something that ordinarily gives you heartburn, there are medications that you can take before eating that food that might help," Spechler said.

Over the years, experts have changed from recommending antacids that treat heartburn symptoms to endorsing therapies such as histamine receptor blockers, which slow production of stomach acid and are available over the counter.

Antacids act like a sponge to soak up the excess stomach acid, but they do nothing to prevent the stomach from creating more acid, Spechler said. So, if you are experiencing temporary heartburn pain, it might help to take some antacid tablets to soak up acid currently being produced and then take a histamine receptor blocker to slow the stomach from producing further acid.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Heartburn is caused most often by the backwash of acid from the stomach into the esophagus, the long tube that carries food from the throat to the stomach. A valve at the end of the esophagus is supposed to function as a one-way release, relaxing to allow food into the stomach and closing so food and acid remain there during digestion.

If there is a leaky valve, gastroesophageal reflux disease, may result. The primary symptom is heartburn.

GOOD CHOICES

Eating or drinking certain types of foods, such as milk, in an attempt to reduce stomach acid generally doesn't work, Spechler said. Milk is a poor antacid and most foods act to stimulate the stomach to produce more acid.

Avoiding foods that cause heartburn is the better strategy. Rich and fatty foods are viewed as things that should be consumed in moderation.

"As a group, anything fatty and anything chocolate is likely to be causing a problem," Spechler said.

MEDICAL CARE

Unfortunately, there's no simple answer to when heartburn sensations should prompt a visit to the doctor. Occasional heartburn usually doesn't signal a more complex problem. "But if you're taking medications daily, I think you should be concerned about it," Spechler said.

The following are warning signs that combined with chronic heartburn could indicate more serious problems:

- Difficulty swallowing.

- Pain in swallowing.

- Unexplained weight loss.

- Unexplained fever.

- Signs of bleeding. (Passing black stools could indicate bleeding from the esophagus into the stomach.)

"If you have heartburn associated with those warning symptoms you really should get in to see your doctor as soon as you can," he said.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE ...

Smoke gets in your eyes, and also your lungs, which can cause otherwise healthy adults to develop chronic respiratory symptoms.

The evidence grows that over time, inhaling environmental tobacco smoke, often called "passive smoking," can lead to the development of disease, according to findings in the November issue of the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine.

Margaret W. Gerbase of the Division of Pulmonary Medicine at the University Hospitals of Geneva in Switzerland, and 11 associates assessed the respiratory symptoms in 1,661 never-smokers over an 11-year period called the Swiss Study on Air Pollution and Lung Diseases in Adults. The two-part study was the first large-scale investigation of the long-term health effects of moderate ambient air pollution in Switzerland.

Gerbase and her colleagues found passive smoking exposure to be strongly linked to the development of cough. In participants with bronchial hyper-reactivity, they observed a link between passive smoking and symptoms such as wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath and chronic bronchitis.

Researchers were able to measure the association between shortness of breath and passive smoking. According to the authors, people with bronchial hyper-reactivity who are persistently exposed to secondhand smoke are at particular risk of developing early-onset chronic respiratory disease.

The researchers concluded that their findings support the need for policies protecting all nonsmokers from the "detrimental effects" of ETS.

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