INDIGESTION & reflux

ONE IN THREE OF US WILL HAVE TUMMY TROUBLES TODAY. HERE'S HOW TO SOOTHE YOUR SYMPTOMS

What is it?
Feeling the burn? Indigestion occurs when your stomach is irritated or inflamed, says Dr Timothy Woodman, assistant medical director at Bupa. 'Heartburn, also called reflux, is a burning pain caused by the acid in your stomach flowing back up your oesophagus (the pipe that goes from your mouth to your stomach).'

What are the symptoms?
Those of us with sensitive stomachs are likely to suffer the discomfort of reflux or indigestion at some stage in our lives, but the key is recognising symptoms so you can take action. 'For reflux, there is a burning behind the breastbone, burping when you bend over or lie down, and a watery taste in your mouth,' says Anton Emmanuel, consultant gastroenterologist at University College Hospital. For indigestion, there's an aching pain in the upper abdomen, which often appears after a meal or after prolonged hunger.

What causes it?
You may think indigestion only strikes after a big meal, but it occurs any time your stomach's acid - which helps us digest food and protects us against infection - is not contained by the layer of mucus, which acts as a barrier. 'If the layer is damaged, stomach acid can irritate tissues underneath,' says Dr Woodman. As for reflux, the key is the muscle in the oesophagus, says Dr Chris Fraser, consultant gastroenterologist at BMI Clementine Churchill Hospital. 'The sphincter at the bottom of the oesophagus normally prevents acid reflux, but problems occur if this muscle isn't working well.'

How do I tackle it?

WHAT TO EAT

**Diet tweaks**
Monitor your diet is key when it comes to beating reflux, says Nitin Makadia, LloydsPharmacy pharmacist and digestive health expert. 'Eat smaller, more frequent meals and cut out fatty foods, as they cause acid which remains in the stomach longer, increasing the risk of it entering the oesophagus.'

**Tilt your bed**
Sleeping can be challenging when reflux strikes. 'It can be made worse if your stomach and oesophagus are lying flat, and gravity isn't keeping the acid in your stomach. Try raising the head of the bed several inches by placing some blocks under it,' says Makadia.

ASK YOUR PHARMACIST
Thankfully, there are lots of over-the-counter medications to help us fend off indigestion. 'Look out for antacids and "raft-forming" liquids like Gaviscon, which form a thick layer on top of the stomach, acting as a barrier to stop contents seeping up into the oesophagus,' says GP Dr James Thompson. Next come H2 blockers, like famotidine and ranitidine, which reduce the amount of acid that your stomach produces. Finally, a proton pump inhibitor, like omeprazole or lansoprazole, will stop your stomach producing acid. You can take them for a maximum of four weeks.

TALK THERAPY
If you'd rather treat the problem without medication, then why not try cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)? Some people find that CBT and psychotherapy reduce stress levels and consequently help to ease the symptoms of indigestion, says Dr Woodman.

When should I visit my GP?
It can usually be treated by making lifestyle changes or taking medicines. However, if your symptoms don't improve, or if you experience unexplained weight loss, severe pain or blood in your vomit, your GP may recommend further tests. You can then discuss the options, which include different medication and, in very rare cases, surgery.