

Healing Heartburn Naturally

By Deborah Savran, ND

Heartburn, or acid indigestion, is such a common symptom that people often feel that it is acceptable, or even normal, to have it for months, years, or even a lifetime. In truth, healthy digestion is free of pain and discomfort. If a person is experiencing discomfort in his or her digestive system, the body is communicating that it is under stress in some way. That can be not only from difficulty assimilating certain foods, but also difficulty assimilating emotional, mental or lifestyle choices.

A truly caring response to the body is to trace back to the cause and remove it. Sadly, scores of us, including health care professionals, continue to choose to treat the symptoms without addressing the cause. There are so many products that offer a quick fix or temporary relief from discomfort that we can “forge on” without questioning the longer-term and more serious damage that occurs.

Anti-inflammatories, analgesics and antacids are all examples of medications that are often used this way. Vintage advertisements for Tums read “eat like candy,” and sure enough these products today are often sold alongside packets of gum and candy. The overuse and abuse of such antacid medications for digestive upset epitomizes the extensive acceptance of this faulty paradigm, a Band-aid approach to medicine. For true healing, we must know how our body works and then make how we live our medicine. In that way, we may choose to make lifestyle and dietary changes and to take supplements and herbal remedies that help us through the healing process.

In healthy digestion, when food enters the stomach, hydrochloric acid (HCl) is released, which converts pepsinogen into pepsin, an enzyme that breaks down proteins in food. Heartburn is what we experience when this stomach acid rises up, or “refluxes” into the esophagus. Acid reflux may occur when there is excessive stomach acids (hyperchlorhydria), but ironically, it very commonly occurs when there is insufficient stomach acid (hypochlorhydria). People’s typical response to acid indigestion is to take antacid medications, which either neutralize or inhibit the production of stomach acids. If the condition is actually one of deficiency, this will greatly exacerbate the problem. It is, therefore, vital to investigate whether there is a condition of excessive or depleted stomach acid before treatment.

Another essential investigation is into potential helicobacter pylori infection. H. pylori is the most common cause of damage to parietal cells—the cells that produce HCl. Over half of the Earth’s population is thought to be carrying the H. pylori bacteria, so it is not surprising that HCl production reduces as we age, often dramatically. The presence of H. pylori may lead to excessive or depleted stomach acids, so this is a first-line investigation for anyone experiencing frequent acid indigestion. Significant to note, heart conditions are sometimes mistaken as heartburn. Chest pain should always be investigated by your medical practitioner.

Home Tests

If you suspect you are low in HCl production, you can do a home test using betaine HCl supplements. Start by taking one HCl supplement during a meal. A normal response to taking HCl is a feeling of warmth in the stomach. If you do not feel this warmth and the supplement does not aggravate your symptoms, you may be low in HCl.

There is also a test using baking soda. First thing in the morning before eating or drinking, drink 1/4 teaspoon of baking soda mixed into 8 ounces of cold water. Time yourself. If your stomach is producing normal amounts of HCl, you will likely belch within two to three minutes, as the acid reacts with the soda to form carbon dioxide gas. Excessive or early belching may equal excessive HCl production, while if you have not belched in four–five minutes, you are likely low. Other tests, such as the Heidelberg gastric analysis, are available from a physician as well.

Dietary and Lifestyle Helpers

Lifestyle changes are often simple and based on changing behaviors already known by us to be detrimental. Yet making such changes can be anything but easy. Getting support from skilled service providers (such as nutritionists, therapists and bodyworkers) to make such changes in a balanced way will lead to greater success. The lifestyle changes that apply to each individual will vary greatly, but some common things to consider include:

Identifying and avoiding known food/drink triggers—common culprits include acidic foods, fried foods, spicy foods, chocolate, caffeinated drinks, and alcohol;

Eating smaller portions or meals;

Eating slowly and calmly;

Managing stress;

Maintaining healthy weight;

Not eating right before bed or lying down;

Not smoking; and

Wearing loose-fitting clothing.

Enzymes Helpers

Supplementary enzymes taken during or immediately after meals supports digestion and is helpful in many cases of heartburn and indigestion. Enzymes assist in the breakdown of proteins (e.g. protease and bromelain), carbohydrates (e.g. amylase, cellulase, lactase) and fats (lipase). Pineapple and papaya as foods are natural sources of bromelain and papain enzymes.

If enzyme supplementation alone does not improve acid indigestion when due to low stomach acid, supplementary betaine HCl may be indicated. See your medical practitioner if you want to investigate HCl supplementation.

Herbal Helpers

Demulcent herbs are of great support when healing any section of the gastrointestinal tract, including the esophagus and stomach, as they coat, soothe and heal. Slippery elm bark powder (*Ulmus fulva*) is a demulcent that is exceptional for acid indigestion relief. Marshmallow root (*Althaea officinalis*), plantain (*Plantago major*), fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) and licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) are other fine choices in this category.

Carminatives are aromatic herbs, rich in essential oils that act as anti-inflammatory and antispasmodic agents to the gut, thus allowing tense muscle to relax. Teas made from herbal carminatives, such as fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*), chamomile (*Anthemus nobile* or *Matricaria recutita*), or peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), are all beneficial.

If you have low production of stomach acids, herbal bitters may be of help, as they increase the flow of digestive juices and stimulate repair of the gut wall. Some exemplary examples include gentian (*Gentiana lutea*), barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*) and dandelion root (*Taraxacum officinale*).

If you are certain you are experiencing excessive production of stomach acids, herbal antacids are supportive. Herbal antacids include meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and centaury (*Centaurium erythraea*).

Remember, do not replace antacid abuse with herbal overuse or supplement dependence. Even if the remedy is natural, the cause must be identified and removed for complete healing to take place, and to make the way we live our true medicine.

For the past 20 years, Deborah Savran has travelled the world as a student of natural medicine, vocal arts, bodywork and consciousness. Savran moved from Australia back to her home town of Minneapolis six years ago. She has since then been offering her work—a gestalt of many modalities, including naturopathy, Maya abdominal therapy, vocal meditation and intuitive bodywork to the local community.

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