

INDIGESTION / HEARTBURN

What is indigestion and heartburn?

Indigestion (dyspepsia) is a general term for pain or discomfort felt in the stomach and under the ribs.

Heartburn is when acid moves up from the stomach into the gullet (oesophagus) and causes a burning pain behind your breastbone.

Indigestion and heartburn can occur together or on their own. It's a common problem that affects most people at some point. In most cases it's mild and only occurs occasionally.

What causes indigestion?

Indigestion is usually related to eating. When you eat, your stomach produces acid. The acid can sometimes irritate your stomach lining, the top part of the bowel, or the oesophagus. This irritation can be painful and cause a burning sensation, particularly if the lining of your digestive system is overly sensitive to acid.

Your stomach can also stretch after eating a big meal, causing acid reflux, where the acid moves up into your oesophagus. Indigestion can also be triggered or made worse by a number of other factors including medication, obesity, pregnancy, smoking, alcohol, stress and anxiety.

There's usually no need to seek medical advice for indigestion as it's often mild and infrequent and specialist treatment isn't required.

How to treat indigestion

Treatment for indigestion will vary depending on what's causing it and how severe your symptoms are.

Most people are able to manage their indigestion by making simple diet and lifestyle changes such as:

- Losing weight can help if you're overweight
- Avoiding foods that seem to make your indigestion worse, such as rich, spicy and fatty foods. You should also cut down on caffeinated drinks, such as tea, coffee and cola, as well as alcohol
- Smoking can also contribute to indigestion
- If you tend to experience the symptoms of indigestion at night:
 - avoid eating for three to four hours before you go to bed - going to bed with a full stomach means there's an increased risk that acid in your stomach will be forced up into your oesophagus while you're lying down
 - when you go to bed, prop your head and shoulders up with a couple of pillows, or raise the head of your bed by a few inches by putting something underneath the mattress. The slight slope should help prevent stomach acid moving up into your oesophagus while you're asleep