

REFLUX IN CHILDREN AND TEENS

What is gastroesophageal reflux?

Gastroesophageal reflux, also called acid reflux, occurs when the stomach contents back up (reflux) into the esophagus or mouth. Acid reflux is a normal process that occurs in healthy infants, children, and adults. Most episodes are brief and do not cause bothersome symptoms or problems.

However, some people with acid reflux have troublesome symptoms, including heartburn, vomiting, or pain with swallowing. In this case, the problem is called gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms in preschool-age children can include:

- Vomiting or feeling stomach acid or food in the throat or mouth
- Less commonly, there can be wheezing, particularly in children with asthma
- Lack of interest in eating (because of pain with eating)
- Poor growth

Symptoms in older children and adolescents can include many of the symptoms listed above, plus:

- Tasting stomach acid in the throat
- Nausea
- Pain or burning in the upper chest (heartburn)
- Discomfort or pain with swallowing
- Awakening at night with nausea or abdominal pain

Pain usually happens after meals and may be worse with stress or when lying down. Pain can last minutes to hours. In all age groups, constipation can worsen some of the symptoms of GERD, such as upset stomach, heartburn, and nausea.

How is reflux diagnosed?

If your child has reflux, vomiting, or abdominal pain, consult your child's doctor before giving any treatment. There are many possible reasons for these symptoms and it is important to confirm the cause before starting a medicine. Your pediatrician will ask you many questions and complete a full physical exam to diagnose reflux- usually further tests are not required.

Is there anything I can do to help my child feel better?

Yes. There are some things that might help with acid reflux, depending on your child's age and symptoms. Your child's doctor might suggest that you:

- Avoid giving your child foods that make symptoms worse (for example, spicy foods, fatty foods)
- Have your child eat smaller, more frequent meals



- Help your child to maintain healthy weight if he or she is overweight (ask your child's doctor for advice on how to do this)
- Keep your child away from cigarette smoke
- Have your child avoid lying down for a few hours after a meal

How else is acid reflux treated?

Most times, acid reflux symptoms will improve with conservative measures as above. Sometimes, if the symptoms are persistent or severe, your doctor will recommend a trial of medication.

Over the counter antacids can be used occasionally for intermittent symptoms. Children younger than school age should **not** take these antacids.

For more significant symptoms, your doctor may provide a prescription for a proton pump inhibitor (PPI) medication to be used daily. They will make a follow-up plan with you and your child to ensure this is effective and that further investigations or treatments are not necessary.