

Script – Print – Is it GERD or something more serious?

[BreAnne Gendron, NP](#), knows all about the effects of gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD. She eventually had to give up coffee because it caused a burning sensation in her throat.

As a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare, Gendron also treats patients who experience GERD in different ways. "GERD probably feels a little bit different for everybody, but it definitely helps [to understand patients' experience] when you have personal experience with it," she says. "Sometimes people with GERD have a flare-up and their stomach hurts, but they don't get that acid-up-the-throat feeling. It just causes stomach discomfort. Sometimes it changes bowel movements. Everybody has a slightly different version of it."

Occasional heartburn or acid reflux is common. But when those symptoms happen frequently – two or more times a week – it could be a sign of GERD and worth mentioning to your health care provider. Symptoms can include regurgitation, trouble swallowing, a feeling of a lump in your throat, a persistent cough, a sore throat or heartburn that doesn't improve with over-the-counter medication.

Gendron says people who are 50 and older and overweight are at highest risk for GERD. Heartburn is one of the most common symptoms of GERD. But how do you know if that burning sensation in your chest is simply reflux or something more serious, such as a heart problem?

Gendron says patients will sometimes go to the emergency department because they are experiencing chest pain. While some people may wonder if they are overreacting, Gendron says it's always better to have potentially serious issues addressed. "If it's the first time you're having chest pain, we can't just guess, 'Oh, that's probably acid reflux,'" she says. "You have to go in and be seen to rule out a cardiac reason, because that's what we do in health care. We rule out the scary stuff, so we can treat the treatable stuff."

Even people with a history of GERD should pay attention when their symptoms change. For example, if chest discomfort occurs during physical activity, it could be a sign of a heart problem and should be evaluated. "I would say any time you have activity where you're carrying in the groceries or you're going up a couple flights of stairs and that pain happens, that's not a GERD symptom," Gendron says. "That's a cardiac symptom, and your doctor can help you figure that out. It's worth a conversation if you're having reflux feelings that are different than normal."

If you experience new, severe or unexplained chest pain, especially with symptoms such as shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, dizziness or pain that spreads to the arm, back, neck or jaw, seek emergency medical care immediately.

Once anything serious has been ruled out, lifestyle changes can help manage GERD symptoms. Common triggers can include spicy or fatty foods, citrus or tomato-based foods, caffeine and soda, alcohol, nicotine and heavy or late-night meals.

Gendron says there isn't one diet that works for everyone with GERD. Instead, people should pay attention to which foods trigger their symptoms and make adjustments as needed. "Some foods will bother people," she says. "I hear people complain to me a lot about things with tomato sauce, so pizza and spaghetti and things like that bother people with acid reflux. So, you can augment your diet. You can cut back on coffee. You can cut back on your nicotine." Medication can also be used to treat GERD when lifestyle changes aren't enough. But Gendron says she prefers to start with lifestyle changes if possible.

For her, that meant giving up her favorite morning beverage. "I personally had to give up coffee because of this problem. I know if I don't drink coffee, that my whole digestive tract is happier," she says. "So, people will figure out which foods bother them, and then you have to avoid those."