

What do Heartburn, Chest Pain, GERD and Sleepless Nights have in Common?

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Heartburn, chest pain, a diagnosis of GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease), sleepless nights, and all manner of digestive upsets are perhaps the most common set of symptoms I hear about in my practice. Clients may be coming to see me because of headaches, or a cancer diagnosis, or menopause, but in the process of reviewing their health history, this set of symptoms pops out. Individuals range from having just one of these symptoms to having any and all possible combinations. Some will have just recently begun experiencing this discomfort and others will have put up with it for decades. It's my conclusion that the standard American lifestyle hits our digestive tract perhaps the hardest of all. And with the most long-term consequences.

From a medical perspective, GERD is technically a disorder of the esophagus. When the lower esophageal sphincter (LES) becomes weakened, it will allow stomach contents to re-enter the esophagus. The most common symptom of GERD is heartburn, which feels like a burning or a hot sensation that can be felt anywhere in the chest on up to the throat.

I like to describe the source of these problems this way. The stomach is meant to be an acid bag. When we get the thought to eat, smell food, and begin to ingest and chew food, the parietal cells of the stomach lining know they need to produce hydrochloric acid (HCl) to break down the food that will be arriving soon, especially proteins. For a number of reasons (diet, aging, antibiotic use, gastritis, and more), in the American lifestyle many of us begin to produce less and less HCl. As we produce less HCl, but continue to eat the same amount of food, our stomachs have to churn and churn to try to get that small amount of HCl to saturate the food for breakdown (digestion). In this churning process, the HCl often moves up to the esophageal area and over time can weaken the sphincter muscle located there (LES). But long before that happens, an individual might be aware of the burning sensation or tenderness, or the many possible discomforts of passing food through the system that has not been adequately digested (gas, cramps, constipation, diarrhea, etc.).

Upon reclining, these symptoms can of course become worse as the stomach contents have an easier pathway northward. Disturbed sleep is a common side effect of this discomfort. Heartburn symptoms can worsen to the point of radiating arm pain and even severe chest pain. In fact, the pain can be similar to heart attack pain. If ever in doubt, go to the emergency room to be checked out. However, once a diagnosis of GERD is made, you may want to consider some of the following holistic nutritional recommendations.

Begin with diet modification. You'll get the most relief by avoiding coffee and alcohol and smoking, followed closely by sugary drinks, chocolate, and sugar in general, high fat foods (especially fried foods), and milk. Plenty of water and electrolyte balance are also very important in the normal production of hydrochloric acid. Also monitor your exercise regime. When you exercise too soon after eating, your body will need to pull energy away from the digestive process in order to provide the fuel your muscles need for exercising, leaving you with an increased likelihood of indigestion and/ or heartburn.

You will need guidance from a natural health practitioner to use the supplements that are most effective in healing gastrointestinal inflammation and promoting adequate HCl production. But do ask your practitioner about such herbs as licorice root, marshmallow root or slippery elm, and aloe vera in conjunction with the amino acid glutamine for promoting healing of the mucosal lining of the GI tract. Once the GI tract is healed, supplements such as apple cider vinegar, herbal bitters, lemon juice, and even hydrochloric acid pills can be very helpful in restoring normal stomach acid production.

The consequences of inadequate digestion are many. As already mentioned, most will feel the discomfort of heartburn, interrupted sleep, chest pain, or a diagnosis of GERD. Some people may not experience any of these symptoms, but in either case, the chronic washing of HCl over the lining of the esophagus can lead to a condition called Barrett esophagus, which is believed to increase the likelihood of cancer of the esophagus. But of perhaps even greater concern are the unpredictable consequences of a kind of malnutrition that results from chronic impaired digestion. All human cells need their macronutrients (protein, carbohydrate, essential fatty acids) on a daily basis. When cells don't get what they need, they must prioritize their needs and corners must be cut.

Though our digestion is designed to operate without our attention, it seems at this point in human history, we would do well to give it a little more support so that it can do that job well that we rely on so completely: the assimilation of food (life) that maintains our life.