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The HEARTBURN Diet

Heartburn is the hallmark symptom of **esophagitis**, or inflammation of the esophagus. Esophagitis is most often caused by gastroesophageal reflux, which is the regurgitation or refluxing of stomach acid upward into the esophagus. Normally, a muscle called the lower esophageal sphincter prevents stomach acid from flowing upward into the esophagus. However, if the sphincter muscle becomes weak or relaxes, or if the pressure in the stomach increases, or if the emptying of the stomach slows, then the acidic stomach contents will be more likely to reflux upward into the esophagus.

Although antacids and prescription medications are often used to treat this condition, **dietary modification** is not only important in the management of symptoms, but often reduces the need for medications.

Goals of dietary treatment:

❶ Avoid foods that irritate an already inflamed esophagus.

This includes spicy foods, peppers and foods which are high in acid content, such as citrus juices. In addition, avoid foods which are either very hot or very cold.

❷ Avoid foods and medications that increase reflux.

Foods that cause relaxation of the lower esophageal sphincter include chocolate, caffeine, alcohol, tomatoes, tomato juice, citrus juice, peppermint and foods with a very high fat content. Other important factors which may relax the sphincter muscle include cigarette smoking, and medications such as birth control pills, tranquilizers, certain asthma medications and antispasmodics. Avoid carbonated beverages, as they cause belching, which carries acidic stomach juice up into the esophagus.

❸ Eliminate foods that delay gastric emptying.

Minimize dietary fat content, because fatty foods slow stomach emptying. When stomach emptying is delayed, food remaining in the

stomach increases stomach acid production and provides more material to reflux into the esophagus. An empty stomach produces less acid and has less content to reflux upward.

❹ Change eating habits that promote reflux.

Eating large meals increases pressure in the stomach and increases reflux. Therefore, eat smaller meals and avoid multi-course meals. Being overweight likewise puts more pressure on the stomach, and losing 10 to 20 pounds often reduces the occurrence of heartburn. Finally, since reflux occurs more often when lying down (when sitting or standing upright, gravity helps keep acid in the stomach), do not eat for 90 to 120 minutes before bed, and do not lie down for 1 to 1½ hours after meals. Elevating the head of the bed 10 or 12 inches may also be helpful.

Heartburn?

Beware of the following:

Citrus juice
Peppers and other spicy foods
Tomatoes
Chocolate ... (sorry!)
Peppermint
Alcohol
Cigarette smoking
Caffeine
Carbonated beverages
Fatty or fried foods
Very hot or very cold foods