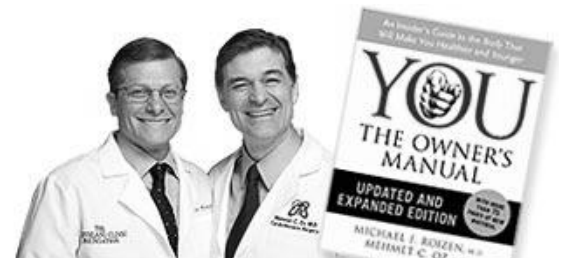


YOU: The Most Important Choices For Making Yourself Younger: Prevent GERD (*gastroesophageal reflux disease*)



Today, we are going to address a specific problem that limits our life, and is common at this time of year—the effects of overeating lead to disruption of your esophageal lining as acid comes from your stomach back into your esophagus. Why does this limit your life? Well, even if you do not develop the horrible end result—esophageal cancer—your stem cells rush in to repair your esophageal burns (sun burns are another area we waste our precious stem cells on), making less available to repair other areas of your body. And since we only get so many stem cells (we think, although science is working on how to increase them; exercise, massage, and meditation seem to help each of us preserve what we have). But, let's start at the beginning...

We are born to eat, and our stomachs can digest nearly anything. But, in order to experiment with new and sometimes poisonous foods, humans must have the ability to vomit food or burp gas. The esophagus makes a sharp angle as it enters the stomach to reduce this regurgitation, but if the junction is opened (the angle is reduced), we get burning and indigestion from GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disorder). Yes, once you're done chewing your food, it passes into the esophagus and through your gastroesophageal junction. Let's look at the anatomy of the esophagus. It doesn't enter from straight down; it enters like Jennifer Aniston trying to sneak into a restaurant—from a side door. As your stomach curls around your esophagus, that side entrance actually helps prevent stomach fluid from regurgitating back up to or at least toward your mouth.

When you get older, though, your stomach becomes more sensitive to the foods you eat, and you wind up with more acid than a 1970s rock concert. Regurgitation is actually one of evolution's greatest gifts. The ability to regurgitate protects us. Horses, for instance, can't vomit, so when they eat poisonous stuff, they can't get it out of their system. That promotes a condition called colic—or severe abdominal pain caused by trauma in the digestive tract—and that's the leading cause of equine deaths. So the stars of MTV's Jackass aren't the only ones who should be thankful humans can vomit, spit up, and vent air with Richter-registering burps. This poison-control system helps you clear harmful substances out of your body, but it also contributes to acid reflux. Your esophagus enters at an acute angle, which kinks off after the food passes to prevent the stomach contents from going back into your esophagus. If the acute angle is distorted, for example by a hiatal hernia (an abnormal hole where muscle should be to keep the angle acute), the acid can flow backward into your esophagus.

When you produce a lot of stomach acid—or overeat late at night—you risk becoming bloated and having that fluid top off in your esophagus. It's just like when you overfill your gas tank—all that fuel runs out of the opening through which it entered. Because your esophagus has less protective lining than your stomach does, it's much more sensitive. And that's what causes the pain in your throat that feels as if somebody's running a lit match up and down it. When that kind of heart-burn recurs, that's GERD—or gastroesophageal reflux disease. Besides being more uncomfortable than high heels that are two sizes too small, GERD can also be dangerous because it leads to chronic inflammation in your esophagus, which has been linked to cancer.

Throats are like mountains and sliding boards. It's much easier to have things go down them than to go up them. So, yes, we (as well as your spouse) would very much like you to avoid spewing fire across the table after you eat. These are the best steps to take for preventing GERD: (SEE OTHER SIDE...)

1. Make your meals smaller.
2. Lose weight if you are overweight (most important choice for those who are overweight, but it's the most time consuming).
3. Eliminate pepper, spicy foods, alcohol, and caffeine.
4. Take two baby aspirins a day with a glass of warm water to help prevent esophageal cancer from developing in GERD-burned area.
5. **AVOID LATE MEALS.** Do not eat within three hours of bedtime. If your idea of late-night entertainment is a party with a bowl of Lucky Charms, switch to lifting weights while watching Kimmel, O'Brien or Letterman. Lying down so soon after eating encourages the flow of acid back up your esophagus so you get that burning taste, which will intensify the symptoms of GERD. Some pills can also cause GERD if you don't take them with water (these are individual to the person).
6. Stop smoking, if you do.
7. Elevate your head six inches when lying on your back.
8. Talk to your doctor about OTC proton pump inhibitors like Prilosec. But do prevent the burn, because we don't want you to use your stem cells on GERD—you may need them to help repair your heart or brain. Proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs) such as Nexium and Prilosec reduce the amount of acid in your stomach, which tames your pain from GERD. But there is still plenty left to help digest your food. In fact, even when you take these drugs, the stomach goes about its normal business, reducing stomach acid during sleep and naturally fluctuating throughout the day. Also keep in mind that digestion isn't just confined to the stomach; your mouth (those glands that produce saliva) and intestines (and the bacteria you have inside them) do a lot of the work, too.

There are a few not-so-great things that PPIs do, though:

- They can make it harder for your body to absorb bone-strengthening calcium, so you need to add extra calcium-containing foods to your diet.
- They don't allow you to absorb vitamin B12 from food very well. Dietary B12 is attached to protein and needs stomach acid to release it, but you can absorb supplements of B12 just fine, so you'll need a vitamin supplement—while some prefer pills, liquid vits are often easier for GERD sufferers.
- They can affect how well you absorb some prescription drugs that require a certain stomach acidity. Make sure all your docs and pharmacists know you're taking PPIs.
- And of course, worse thing they do...and why we do not want you to take them for more than 2 weeks at a time: they can hide a serious problem that is not just GERD.

About the author: **Michael F. Roizen, M.D.**, is a professor of anesthesiology and internal medicine, Chief Wellness Officer, and chair of the Wellness Institute at the Cleveland Clinic. Dr. Roizen can be heard on over 30 radio stations Saturdays from 5 to 7 pm. For a listing just email a request to YouDocs@gmail.com

NOTE: You should NOT take this as medical advice.

This article is of the opinion of its author. Before you do anything, please consult with your doctor.