



Excellence in Women's Healthcare

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Heartburn and Indigestion During Pregnancy

Many women have heartburn for the first time during pregnancy, particularly during the second and third trimesters. Although this is not usually a sign of a serious problem, it can be uncomfortable or painful.

Gastroesophageal reflux is often called "acid reflux" or "heartburn." But this condition has nothing to do with the heart!

Causes of Heartburn and Indigestion During Pregnancy:

Heartburn occurs when digested food from your stomach, which contains acid, is pushed up toward your esophagus. This causes a burning sensation behind your breastbone or a burning sensation that starts in your stomach and seems to rise up. You may also have a sour taste in your mouth or a feeling that vomit is rising in your throat.

Normally, food moves down a pipe (called the esophagus) between your mouth and your stomach. When you're not eating, a circular valve around the bottom of your esophagus closes off the connection between your esophagus and your stomach. This valve keeps the acids in your stomach from rising up.

When you swallow, the valve relaxes to allow food and liquid to flow through. If the valve relaxes when you're not eating, the acids from your stomach can flow back up into your esophagus, irritating it and causing a burning sensation.

Several things can cause the valve to relax more easily, such as:

- ❖ Greasy or fatty foods
- ❖ Chocolate or drinks containing caffeine
- ❖ Onions, garlic or spicy foods
- ❖ Certain medications
- ❖ Eating a very large meal
- ❖ Lying down after eating

During pregnancy, hormones relax the muscles in your digestive tract, including the valve in the esophagus. This allows stomach acids to more easily seep back up the esophagus, especially when you're lying down. Heartburn can be worse in the second and third trimesters, when your growing uterus presses on your stomach. This sometimes pushes food back up into the esophagus.

Pregnancy hormones also slow down:

- ❖ The muscles that push food from your esophagus into your stomach.
- ❖ The muscles that contract to digest food in your stomach, which slows down your digestion.

These changes can also lead to indigestion, which can make you feel very full, bloated or gassy.

Heartburn and indigestion: what you can do:

- ❖ Eat smaller meals. Eat five or six small meals a day instead of eating a few large meals.
- ❖ Drink less while eating. Avoid drinking large amount of fluids with your meals. Drink your fluids between meals instead.
- ❖ Avoid bending or lying down right after eating. Sit up do light housework, or take a walk until your body has had a chance to digest. Be sure to eat your last meal of the day several hours before bedtime. If you lie down, prop your upper body up with a few pillows.
- ❖ Avoid foods that trigger heartburn. Avoid spicy, greasy or fatty foods, chocolate, caffeine, and other foods that can cause heartburn. These can relax the LES and allow acid to reflux.
- ❖ Don't gain too much weight. Gain a sensible amount of weight. Stay within the guidelines your health provider sets. Excess pounds put extra pressure on you abdomen, increasing your chances of getting heartburn.
- ❖ Wear loose clothing. Tight clothing can increase the pressure on your stomach and abdomen.
- ❖ Raise your head when you lie down. Prop your head up a few inches with pillows. Or raise the head of your bed with two bricks or blocks.
- ❖ Wait at least three hours after your last meal before going to bed.
- ❖ Bend at the knees instead of the waist. Bending at the waist puts more pressure on your stomach.
- ❖ Don't smoke. While your doctor may urge you break the habit because you are pregnant, smoking can also cause heartburn.

If you need an antacid to relieve symptoms, talk to your health care provider to choose the right one for you.

