

Heartburn

What is heartburn?

Heartburn is a common symptom that causes a burning sensation in your chest, usually after eating or when lying down. It occurs when stomach acid flows back into your oesophagus (food pipe), irritating its lining. While occasional heartburn is normal, frequent or severe heartburn may indicate an underlying condition like gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD).

What causes heartburn?

Heartburn happens when the lower oesophageal sphincter (LOS), a valve that separates your stomach from your oesophagus, doesn't close properly. This allows stomach acid to flow back into your oesophagus, causing irritation and discomfort. Common triggers include:

- Eating large or heavy meals, especially close to bedtime
- Spicy, fatty, or acidic foods
- Drinking alcohol, coffee, or carbonated beverages
- Smoking
- Being overweight or pregnant, which increases pressure on the stomach
- Lying down or bending over after eating

Certain medications, such as anti-inflammatory painkillers (NSAIDs) and some blood pressure drugs, can also contribute to heartburn.

What are the symptoms of heartburn?

The main symptom of heartburn is a burning sensation in your chest, often described as discomfort behind the breastbone. It may worsen after eating or when lying down. Other symptoms can include:

- A sour or bitter taste in your mouth
- Regurgitation of food or stomach acid
- Difficulty swallowing
- A persistent cough or hoarseness
- Feeling bloated or full

If you experience heartburn frequently (more than twice a week) or if it significantly affects your daily life, you should seek medical advice.

When to seek urgent help

In rare cases, heartburn can be a sign of a more serious condition. Seek medical attention immediately if you experience:

- Difficulty swallowing or a feeling that food is stuck
- Unexplained weight loss
- Vomiting, especially if there's blood in it
- Dark or black stools, which may indicate bleeding
- Severe or persistent chest pain, as this could be a heart-related issue

How is heartburn investigated?

At Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic, we use advanced diagnostic tools to investigate the cause of your heartburn and rule out more serious conditions. Common tests include:

- **Upper GI endoscopy:** A thin, flexible tube with a camera is passed into your oesophagus to look for inflammation, ulcers, or other abnormalities.
- **Oesophageal pH monitoring:** This measures acid levels in your oesophagus over 24 hours to assess the severity of reflux.
- **Oesophageal manometry:** This test measures the pressure and movement of the muscles in your oesophagus to identify any functional issues.

How can you manage heartburn?

For occasional heartburn, simple lifestyle changes can often help reduce symptoms:

- **Eat smaller meals:** Avoid large, heavy meals, especially late at night
- **Avoid trigger foods:** Limit spicy, fatty, and acidic foods as well as alcohol and caffeine
- **Lose weight:** If you're overweight, even modest weight loss can reduce pressure on your stomach.
- **Quit smoking:** Smoking weakens the LOS, making reflux more likely
- **Elevate your head while sleeping:** Raise the head of your bed by 15-20cm to prevent acid from flowing back into your oesophagus
- **Avoid lying down after eating:** Wait at least 2-3 hours before lying down or going to bed

Over-the-counter medications, such as antacids or acid reducers, can provide short-term relief. However, if your symptoms persist or worsen, you may need prescription medication or further evaluation.

What are the treatment options for heartburn?

If lifestyle changes and over-the-counter medications don't provide relief, your doctor may recommend:

- **Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs):** These medications reduce stomach acid production and promote healing of the oesophagus.
- **H2 blockers:** These drugs also reduce acid production, though they work differently from PPIs.
- **Surgery:** In severe cases, procedures like fundoplication may be recommended to strengthen the LOS and reduce reflux.

Your treatment plan will depend on the cause and severity of your heartburn, and we'll work with you to find the best solution.

Why choose Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic?

At Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic, we specialise in diagnosing and managing heartburn and related conditions like GORD. Our experienced team uses state-of-the-art equipment to provide accurate diagnoses and personalised treatment plans. We are committed to helping you find relief and improve your quality of life.

Contact us

If you're struggling with persistent or severe heartburn, contact Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic today to book a consultation. Early diagnosis and treatment can help you take control of your symptoms and protect your oesophageal health.