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A Burning Feeling

More than 10 percent of Americans experience the burning and discomfort of heartburn every day. What many don't know is that heartburn, or acid indigestion, is a common symptom of chronic acid reflux, also known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

What is acid reflux and GERD?

Acid reflux occurs when muscles of the lower esophagus relax and allow stomach acids to flow upwards into the esophagus and even the mouth. These stomach acids can cause irritation and inflammation of the esophagus while negatively impacting your oral health. Acid reflux may progress further, developing into GERD. In patients who have GERD, the esophageal muscles are unable to keep stomach acids from flowing upwards, causing corrosion of the esophageal lining and the uncomfortable burning sensation associated with heartburn.

Signs and symptoms

Though often times difficult to detect, GERD can be associated with the following signs and symptoms:

- Heartburn
- Difficulty swallowing
- Regurgitation
- Burning sensation in mouth
- Sore throat
- Nausea, vomiting, belching
- Chronic coughing
- Erosion of tooth enamel
- Tooth sensitivity
- Chipping, discoloration of teeth
- Bad breath

How does GERD affect your oral health?

In addition to damaging the esophagus and increasing your risk of esophageal

cancer, over time GERD can erode tooth enamel. Research indicates tooth enamel begins to erode at a pH, or acid level, of 5.5. With a pH of less than 2.0, your stomach acid can easily damage tooth enamel and cause increased tooth sensitivity, decay, discoloration, and chipping.

Treatments and lifestyle modifications

GERD can be diagnosed by your physician using a variety of tests, including pH monitoring, X-rays, or endoscopy. Though GERD is a chronic condition, its symptoms can be treated using medications and lifestyle modifications. In addition to taking over-the-counter antacids and prescription H₂ receptor blockers, you can reduce GERD symptoms by:

- Avoiding trigger foods and beverages, including chocolate, spicy/greasy foods, tomato-based foods, alcohol, and coffee.
- Quitting smoking.
- Refraining from eating several hours before bed, or lying down two to three hours after eating.
- Losing weight if you are overweight or obese.
- Avoiding tight clothing.

Protect your teeth against acid reflux

Practicing good oral hygiene is the best way to prevent acid reflux or GERD from damaging your teeth and causing decay. In addition to brushing twice a day, you can take the following steps to ensure GERD doesn't impact your oral health:

- Visit your dentist regularly for tooth enamel evaluation.
- Use dentin-sensitive toothpaste.
- Rinse your mouth with water following acid reflux episodes.



- Do *not* brush your teeth for 60 minutes after consuming acidic foods or drinks.
- Dissolve baking soda in water and swish around the mouth after acid reflux occurs.
- Receive fluoride treatments to strengthen your teeth.
- Wear a dentist-prescribed mouthguard at night to prevent acid from damaging your teeth.
- Avoid over-the-counter antacids, especially at night, that have a high sugar content.

If you believe you may be at risk for acid reflux or GERD, speak with your dentist or physician. Though GERD can be incredibly damaging to your oral health, lifestyle modifications and treatment can help ensure your teeth remain safe and healthy.