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Understanding Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)



Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)?

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease, commonly known as GERD, is a chronic condition in which acid in the stomach flows back up into the oesophagus, causing irritation and discomfort. Oesophagus is a tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach.

Symptoms

- **Heartburn:** A burning sensation in the chest, often after eating
- **Regurgitation:** Sour or bitter-tasting acid backs up into the throat or mouth
- **Dysphagia:** Difficulty in swallowing
- **Chest Pain:** Sometimes confused with heart-related pain
- **Chronic Cough:** A persistent cough not related to respiratory issues

Causes

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD) occurs when the lower oesophageal sphincter, a ring of muscles at the bottom of the oesophagus weakens or relaxes abnormally, allowing stomach acid to flow back up into the oesophagus.

Risk Factors

- **Obesity:** Excess body weight can put pressure on the abdomen, leading to GERD
- **Hiatal Hernia:** When the upper part of the stomach protrudes into the chest cavity
- **Pregnancy:** Hormonal changes and pressure on the abdomen during pregnancy can trigger GERD
- **Smoking:** Smoking weakens the lower oesophageal sphincter thereby increasing stomach acid production
- **Certain Foods:** Spicy, fatty or acidic foods can trigger symptoms

Diagnosis

- **Medical History:** The doctor will inquire about the symptoms and medical history
- **Physical Examination:** A thorough physical check-up will be done by the healthcare professional
- **UGI Endoscopy:** A flexible tube with a camera will be inserted into the oesophagus examination
- **Esophageal pH Monitoring:** Over a period of 24 hours, pH of the acid in the will be measured

Treatment

Lifestyle Changes

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Elevate the head of the bed
- Avoid large meals before bedtime
- Quit smoking
- Limit alcohol and caffeine consumption

Medications

- **Antacids:** Neutralises pH of the acid in the stomach
- **H2 Blockers:** Reduces acid production in the stomach
- **Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs):** Blocks acid production in the stomach

Surgery

- In severe cases, surgery may be considered to strengthen the lower oesophageal sphincter or to repair a Hiatal Hernia

Complications

- **Oesophagitis:** Inflammation of the oesophagus
- **Strictures:** Narrowing of the oesophagus
- **Barrett's Oesophagus:** Pre-cancerous changes in the oesophageal lining
- **Respiratory Issues:** Acid reflux can reach the lungs, causing respiratory problems

When to Seek Medical Attention

If one experiences severe chest pain, difficulty in breathing or persistent symptoms despite lifestyle changes and medications, they should seek immediate medical attention.

Managing GERD involves a combination of lifestyle changes, medications and, in some cases, surgery. By understanding the causes, symptoms and treatment options, one can work with the healthcare team to develop a personalised plan to control GERD and improve the quality of life. Always consult the healthcare provider for advice tailored to the specific condition.