

ASK THE NUTE GURU

THE NUTE (NUTRITION) GURU IMPARTS WISDOM ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF NATURAL, WHOLE-FOODS NUTRITION FOR MIND/BODY WELLNESS.

Q

Hey Nute Guru, I have a history of bad heartburn and I've tried every pill in the book to make it stop, can you suggest some natural ways to relieve the burn?

A

Heartburn is an issue that plagues many of us! Everyone has their own methods of overcoming the burn, but we've found some great non-medicinal ways. Check out these nine natural changes and extinguish the fire!

1. Kick the heartburn drugs.

Contrary to what you might think, heartburn drugs tend to do more harm than good. While there's no denying that they help reduce stomach acid, the problem is that the meds also stop the acid from doing the digestive work it's supposed to do.

Though heartburn gives stomach acid a bad name, acid is absolutely essential to digestion: it helps break down food and stimulates the digestive enzymes in your small intestine; it helps keep the balance of good and bad bacteria in check; it's your primary defense against food-borne infections and it helps your gut absorb essential nutrients.

When you suppress acid production with heartburn drugs, you're inhibiting digestion, preventing absorption of vitamins and nutrients and all but wiping out the good gut bacteria your gut needs to keep your immune system strong. You're also setting the stage for damage to the intestinal lining – yikes!

And please be aware that when you stop these heartburn medications cold turkey, you get a rebound effect with the heartburn becoming more severe. So taper off them slowly, preferably under the supervision of a knowledgeable health care practitioner.

2. Lighten your mealtime load.

The more food that's in your belly, the longer it takes to digest and the more likely it will reflux. Eating several smaller meals throughout the day will be easier on your digestive tract than bombarding it with three big ones. And at the end of the day, try to put three hours between your evening meal and bedtime so that digestion is well underway before you lie down for the night. (Looking for a relaxing way to unwind? Try this evening routine.)

3. Skip the Spanx.

If heartburn is an issue, resist the urge to squish yourself into super skinny jeans. Give your belly room to digest. Tight clothes can put pressure on your stomach, pressing food back up into your esophagus.

4. Hold the jalapeños.

Instead of popping pills to put out the fire, give your digestive tract a vacation from high-acid foods that irritate tender tissues. A few common acidic culprits include coffee, alcohol, garlic, peppers, onions, tomatoes, orange juice and spicy foods.

To help my patients identify their heartburn triggers, I ask them to keep a food diary and monitor how their body reacts to high acid foods, so they get a better sense as to which ones are causing their heat and which ones aren't. For those with more stubborn cases, I also recommend trying a cleanse diet which eliminates the common foods that fuel the burn.

5. Do drink Swedish bitters.

All that heartburn pill-popping will over time deplete your body of the natural acids that are essential for proper digestion. To stimulate your body's own production of digestive acids, I recommend stirring 1-3 tablespoons Swedish bitters into an 8-ounce glass of water. Drink this 15 minutes before eating to get the juices flowing and aid in healthy digestion.

6. Linger over breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Every millimeter of your digestive tract, starting with chewing in your mouth, aids in digestion. Acid-neutralizing saliva paves the way for a painless journey of food into the stomach.

When you eat quickly, don't chew enough, or gulp your food, you miss out on critical steps, setting the stage for heartburn and indigestion. So take your time, savor each bite and enjoy! (If you're not sure how to eat mindfully, start here.)

7. Don't smoke.

There are hundreds of reasons to stop smoking and heartburn is one of them. Smoking irritates the membranes of the throat and esophagus, just about the last thing you should be doing if you have reflux or heartburn. What's more, nicotine weakens the esophageal valve, allowing acid to flow back up causing irritation and burn. So if you want to stop the burn, kick the butts.

8. Sleep on a slope.

When you lie down flat, stomach acid remains in the esophagus longer than it should, giving rise to that burning feeling. Lying down can also lead to inflammation of the esophagus, a potentially dangerous condition.

A simple way to avoid the problem: let gravity do the work of keeping the acid in your stomach at night – simply sleep on a slope. All you need to do is slightly elevate your head and chest with an extra pillow or rolled up towel. The downward angle will help keep acid where it belongs – in your stomach!

9. Give your gut a helping hand.

If you're going to combat heartburn, keep in mind that an unbalanced, irritated, poorly functioning gut can't do it on its own – it needs a helping hand. Restoring the microflora and repopulating the gut with good bacteria is the starting point. Using herbal anti-microbials (to kill the bad guys) and probiotics (to replenish the good guys) will help return gut microflora to a balanced state. Add to that botanicals and extra nutrients to help protect your GI tract, ease digestion, repair the lining of the gut and prevent heartburn. Eat a diet that supports gut health.