

WELL *on your way*

GERD (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease)

It turns out that what you may not know about GERD can hurt you. **GERD** stands for **G**astro **E**sophageal **R**eflux **D**isease. Gastroesophageal reflux is a backflow of acid from the stomach into the swallowing tube or esophagus. This acid can irritate and sometimes damage the delicate lining on the inside of the esophagus. The usual symptom is heartburn, an uncomfortable burning sensation behind the breastbone, most commonly occurring after a meal. In some individuals this reflux is frequent or severe enough to cause more significant problems, that is a disease. Thus, gastroesophageal reflux *disease* is a clinical condition that occurs when the reflux of stomach acid into the esophagus is severe enough to impact the patient's life and/or damage the esophagus.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The stomach produces hydrochloric acid after each meal to aid in the digestion of food.
- The inner lining of the stomach resists corrosion by this acid.
- The lining of the esophagus does not share these resistant features and stomach acid can damage it.
- The esophagus lies just behind the heart, so the term heartburn was coined to describe the sensation of acid burning the esophagus.
- Normally, a ring of muscle called the lower esophageal sphincter prevents reflux (or the backing up) of acid.
- With GERD, however, the sphincter relaxes between swallows allowing stomach contents and corrosive acid to well up and damage the lining of the esophagus.
- GERD affects nearly one third of the adult population of the United States.
- Almost 10% of adults experience GERD weekly or daily.
- Even infants and children can have GERD.
- GERD is more likely to occur at night, especially if someone has eaten a meal or late night snack before going to bed.



NEED ADDITIONAL HELP?

Piedmont Community Health Plan along with our network of local participating physicians have programs to help patients deal with gastroesophageal reflux disease through dietary and lifestyle changes, medical therapy and minimally invasive surgery.

Left untreated, chronic GERD can damage your esophagus and possibly lead to esophageal cancer. Damage caused by GERD can bring serious medical problems such as difficulty swallowing (dysphagia), a narrowing of the esophagus (stricture) or Barrett's Esophagus, a pre-cancerous condition.

If you think you have chronic heartburn or GERD, talk with your PCHP Network physician or call us at **(434) 947-4463** or **(800) 400-7247**.

