Holiday Heartburn or GERD?

It seems to happen every year – you eat just a bit too much of the turkey, enjoy that extra piece of pumpkin pie, or indulge in a second portion of yams. Hours later, the heartburn sets in.

As you reach for your usual over-the-counter remedy, however, we recommend you to take stock of your symptoms. Chronic heartburn can often be a symptom of something far more serious – GERD.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, affects men, women, and children. It is estimated that 20% of the U.S. adult population experience GERD-related symptoms at least once a week. GERD occurs when contents from the stomach flow back into the esophagus, or food pipe, causing reflux. Although common, GERD often is unrecognized – its symptoms misunderstood. This is unfortunate because GERD is generally a treatable disease. Serious complications can result if it is not treated properly.

All too often, GERD is either self-treated or mistreated. That’s why every November, Thanksgiving week marks IFFGD’s Annual GERD Awareness Week.

GERD is a chronic disease that is treatable and can usually be controlled. But that can only happen if people understand what this disease is and how to recognize the symptoms.

Symptoms of GERD vary from person to person. Heartburn that occurs more frequently than once per week, becomes more severe at night, or wakes a person from sleep may be a sign of a more serious condition like GERD, and consultation with a physician is advised. Even occasional heartburn – if it has occurred for a period of five years or more, or is associated with difficulty in swallowing – may signal a more serious condition.

Only a physician can make a diagnosis and provide treatment for GERD. Over-the-counter preparations provide only temporary symptom relief. They do not prevent recurrence of symptoms or allow an injured esophagus to heal.

Under a physician’s care, inflammation or injury of the esophagus will most often be healed and serious medical complications managed or even prevented. Treatment options include lifestyle modifications, medications, surgery, or a combination of methods.

Did You Know – Heartburn is Not the Only Symptom of GERD?

Chronic heartburn is the most common symptom of GERD. Acid regurgitation (refluxed material into the mouth) is another common symptom. But numerous less common symptoms other than heartburn may be associated with GERD. These may include:

- Belching
- Difficulty or pain when swallowing
- Waterbrash (sudden excess of saliva)
- Dysphagia (the sensation of food sticking in the esophagus)
- Chronic sore throat
- Laryngitis
- Inflammation of the gums
- Erosion of the enamel of the teeth
- Chronic irritation in the throat
- Hoarseness in the morning
- A sour taste
- Bad breath

Chest pain may indicate acid reflux. Nevertheless, this kind of pain or discomfort should prompt urgent medical evaluation. Possible heart conditions must always be excluded first.
Relief of symptoms after a two-week trial therapy with a proton pump inhibitor (a prescription medication that inhibits gastric acid secretion) is an indication that GERD is the cause. In the doctor’s office tests are used to confirm or exclude a diagnosis of GERD.

Tips to Help Avoid Holiday Heartburn

- Don’t lie down within 3 hours of eating. That’s when acid production is at its peak, so plan early dinners and avoid bedtime snacks.

- Avoid large meals, especially late in the day. Try to make your main meal the mid-day meal.

- Be extra cautious around the holiday foods that most commonly aggravate symptoms: chocolate, caffeine, onions, fried or fatty foods, alcoholic beverages, and even peppermint may cause reflux.

About IFFGD
The International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org or www.aboutGERD.org.

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