

Who hasn't suffered from indigestion and heartburn, especially after over-indulging with food or drink, or when rushing meals? For some of us, indigestion and heartburn happen for other reasons and can cause considerable discomfort. It's good to know help is available from your pharmacist.

With indigestion (or dyspepsia), we can feel sick and experience gas, or a bloated feeling, in the stomach. "Indigestion causes discomfort and pain in the area between your ribs and belly button, and usually it occurs during eating, or immediately after" advise *Self Care* pharmacists. A common symptom of indigestion is heartburn, where there is a burning feeling rising upwards from the stomach towards the throat. The acid contents of the stomach return, or 'reflux', back into the oesophagus (tube joining the throat to the stomach). It results in irritation of the oesophagus and throat. Reflux occurs because a special valve at the junction of the oesophagus and stomach does not close fully.

Indigestion and heartburn can be caused, or made worse, by:

- foods, like cabbage, onions, cucumber, curries, chocolate
- certain drinks, eg alcohol, fizzy drinks, strong coffee and tea
- eating food too fast; eating fatty, or large, meals, especially late at night
- stress and anxiety; smoking; bending and stooping; being overweight
- pregnancy
- certain medicines – such as aspirin and other anti-inflammatory medicines for pain/arthritis.

Try to identify the cause of your indigestion/heartburn and, where you can, avoid the things that 'trigger' it. If the medicines you take give you symptoms, let your pharmacist or doctor know. Sometimes taking medicines with food can help, otherwise an alternative product might be more suitable. Remember to take your medicines with a glass of water, while sitting or standing upright.

According to *Self Care* pharmacists, "there are self-help changes you can make to help prevent or reduce symptoms of indigestion and heartburn. They include stopping smoking (see the **Quit Smoking** fact card); avoiding rich, spicy, fatty, foods, and large meals late in the day, and eating smaller meals; having plenty of physical activity – at least 30 minutes most days; losing weight if you are overweight (see the **Weight and Health** fact card) and learning to relax and sleep well (the **Sleeping Well** fact card has such information)." Focusing initially on lifestyle changes may mean medicines are not necessary.

If medicines are required, your pharmacy has a wide range of products available for the short-term relief of heartburn and indigestion symptoms. "We can assist you in selecting the one that is best for your situation", advise *Self Care* pharmacists. Antacids neutralise excess acid in the stomach. They can provide quick and effective relief from the bloated feelings and burning pain, but their effects don't last long. Reflux symptoms can be relieved by alginates that form a 'raft' on top of your stomach contents, helping to prevent them being regurgitated. Where these medicines do not help, or symptoms are experienced as often as 2 or more times per week, other more effective medicines may be required that decrease the amount of acid made by the stomach. Your pharmacist can, in certain circumstances, supply these medicines without a prescription for the short term relief of heartburn symptoms. Your *Self Care* pharmacist will advise if this is appropriate for you;

"If there is still no improvement with lifestyle measures along with short-term use of medicines, or if symptoms suggest another cause, then we would refer you to your doctor for further investigations and treatment", confirm *Self Care* pharmacists. "Our **Indigestion & Heartburn** fact card has more information, so ask us for a copy."