

# Heartburn during Pregnancy

## What is heartburn?

Heartburn refers to the symptoms you feel when acids in the stomach flow backward into the esophagus. (The esophagus is the tube that carries food from your throat to your stomach.) This backward movement of stomach acid is called reflux. The acid can burn and irritate the esophagus, throat, and vocal cords.

Heartburn is a common problem. Despite its name, it has nothing to do with the heart.

## What is the cause?

At the bottom of the esophagus there is a ring of muscle called a sphincter. It acts like a valve. When you swallow food, the sphincter opens to let the food pass into the stomach. The ring then closes to keep the stomach contents from going back into the esophagus. If the sphincter is weak or too relaxed, stomach acid and food flow backward into the esophagus. Because the esophagus does not have the protective lining that the stomach has, the acid causes pain and irritation.

Changes in your body during pregnancy, especially hormone changes, may cause or worsen heartburn. The problem is more common during the last months of pregnancy, when the growing baby presses against your stomach and your hormones are at high levels. One in four pregnant women have heartburn daily.

Foods that may make heartburn worse are:

- Foods high in fat
- Sugar
- Chocolate
- Peppermint
- Onions
- Citrus foods such as orange juice
- Tomato-based foods
- Spicy foods
- Coffee and other drinks with caffeine, such as tea and colas
- Alcohol

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of heartburn are:

- A burning feeling in your chest
- Acid or sour taste in your mouth
- Frequent belching
- A feeling of bloating or fullness in the stomach

These symptoms tend to happen after very large meals and especially with activity such as bending or lifting after meals. Tight clothing may make the symptoms worse. You may have symptoms when you lie down after eating and feel better when you sit up.

## **How is it diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and symptoms. You will probably not need to have any special tests.

## **How is it treated?**

Your healthcare provider may ask you to do the following:

- Eat smaller meals more often, instead of 2 or 3 large meals each day.
- If you find that certain foods or drinks seem to cause your symptoms or make them worse, avoid those foods.
- Sit with good posture when you are eating. Slouching can put extra pressure on your stomach.
- Drink plenty of fluids between meals. Drink slowly. Drink no more than 1 cup with meals. Fluid with food can overflow your stomach.
- Wait an hour or longer after eating before you lie down. If you have to lie down after a meal, lie on your left side. Keep your head and shoulders slightly higher than the rest of your body. It's best to not eat for 2 to 3 hours before you go to bed. An empty stomach produces less acid, so you are less likely to have heartburn while you sleep.
- Raise the head of your bed or use more than 1 pillow so that your head is higher than your stomach when you lie down. This may allow gravity to help keep food from backing up.
- Chew gum or suck on hard candy to produce a flow of saliva. Saliva may help control stomach acid. Do not chew or eat mint gum or candy.
- Avoid tight clothes and belts.

If you have occasional heartburn after meals or at bedtime, your healthcare provider may recommend an antacid. Most of the standard heartburn medicines are considered safe to use in pregnancy. However, you should not start taking an antacid without first checking with your provider. Also, do not take baking soda (sodium bicarbonate). It tends to cause swelling and can make you very sick.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

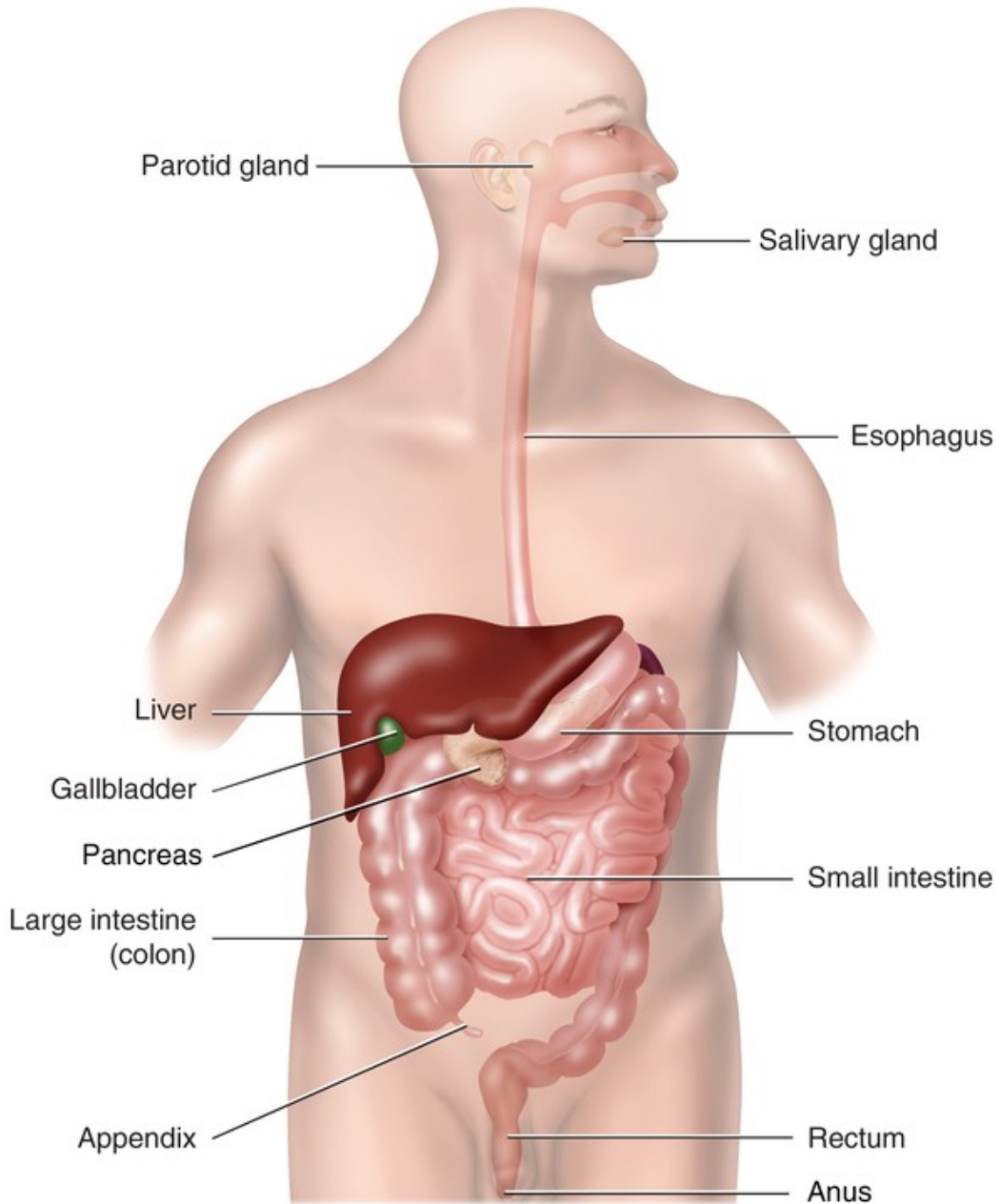
- Follow the treatment guidelines recommended above to help prevent heartburn.
- Ask your healthcare provider if any other medicines you are taking could be making your heartburn worse.
- Check with your provider about taking antacids. Taking an antacid 1 to 2 hours before bed can help.

- Stop smoking if you are a smoker. Cigarette smoking increases the acidity of your stomach's contents. Smoking can also hurt your baby.
- Talk to your provider if you do not get relief and your heartburn gets worse.

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# Digestive System



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