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Gastroesophageal Reflux in Children

When children repeatedly experience the symptoms of acid indigestion (commonly called “heartburn”), they may have a problem with their digestive system. Acid indigestion can be caused by the contents of the stomach backing up into the esophagus. This is referred to as **gastroesophageal reflux**.

An article in the July 19, 2000, issue

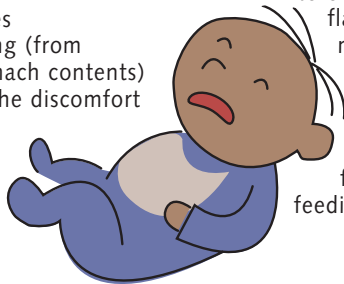
of JAMA discusses the possibility of a genetic link for severe gastroesophageal reflux in children.

You should consult your doctor if you think that you or your child has any persistent health problems or complaints. Your doctor can provide strategies or medical treatments for controlling the disorder.

SYMPTOMS OF GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX IN INFANTS:

Occurring soon after eating:

- Vomiting
- Coughing episodes
- Difficulty breathing (from inhalation of stomach contents)
- Irritability (from the discomfort or burning sensations of acid indigestion)



STRATEGIES FOR CONTROLLING GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX IN INFANTS:

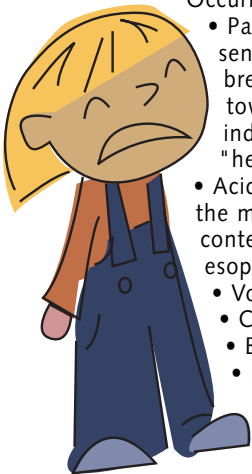
Gastroesophageal reflux is most likely to occur when a child is lying flat. The following strategies may minimize reflux:

- Burp your infant several times during and after feeding
- Position the infant upright for about 30 minutes after feeding

SYMPTOMS OF GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX IN CHILDREN:

Occurring soon after eating:

- Pain or burning sensation behind the breastbone that moves toward the neck (acid indigestion or “heartburn”)
- Acidic or bitter taste in the mouth (stomach contents flowing up the esophagus into the mouth)
 - Vomiting
 - Coughing episodes
 - Belching episodes
 - Feeling pain when swallowing



STRATEGIES FOR CONTROLLING GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX IN CHILDREN:

- Do not eat within 2 to 3 hours before bedtime
- Avoid beverages that contain caffeine, since caffeine can relax the lower esophageal sphincter (many sodas contain caffeine, so check the labels)
- Avoid fried or fatty foods, chocolate, and peppermint
- Avoid foods with high acid content, like tomatoes and citrus fruits
- Avoid spicy foods
- Raise the head of the child's bed or provide extra pillows so that their head and chest are elevated while sleeping
- If your child is overweight, help him or her lose weight through diet and increased physical activity

WHAT IS GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX?

The **esophagus** is the muscular tube that connects the mouth to the stomach. Chewed food, fluids, and saliva flow down the esophagus from the mouth to the stomach. When the contents of the stomach (including acids and other digestive juices) back up into the esophagus, this is referred to as gastroesophageal reflux. This **reflux**, or backward flow, of fluid can be caused by the weakness or improper functioning of the **lower esophageal sphincter**, a muscle that acts as a valve that opens to allow food to enter the stomach. When it is working properly, it keeps any fluid from flowing back up into the esophagus.

TREATMENT FOR GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX:

If the other strategies are not helpful and your child continues to experience gastroesophageal reflux, your doctor can prescribe medication that may help with the symptoms. In extreme cases, surgery may be necessary.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse *Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease in Infants and Children*
2 Information Way, Bethesda, MD 20892-3570
or www.niddk.nih.gov
- American College of Gastroenterology Patient Information
703/820-7400 or www.acg.gi.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, American College of Gastroenterology, American Academy of Pediatrics, *The AMA Complete Guide to Your Children's Health*

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