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How Does Gerd Cause a Cough?

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What Is GERD

Gastroesophageal esophageal reflux (GERD) is the medical term for acid reflux, or heartburn. Normally, a small circular muscle at the base of the esophagus opens to allow food to pass into the stomach and closes to keep the digestive fluids from splashing back up into the esophagus. But sometimes the muscle does not close completely because of a change in stomach pressure caused by certain foods or medications, or else the muscle becomes weak and no longer closes properly. The esophageal lining is unable to tolerate the regurgitated acids, resulting in the sensation of heartburn.

GERD and Cough

Although not one of the more obvious symptoms of GERD, cough is perhaps the most easily overlooked. Heartburn, chest pain, a sour taste in the mouth and difficulty swallowing are all recognized as symptoms of GERD. Cough and wheezing are also common symptoms often not associated with GERD. GERD-associated cough may occur along with the symptoms of burning and pain, but some people only have the cough.

How GERD Causes Cough

Stomach acid stimulates nerves when it is regurgitated into the esophagus, causing cough. Sometimes such a small amount of stomach acid reaches the esophagus that it does not burn, but it is enough acid to cause a cough. The opposite situation--too much regurgitated stomach fluid--can cause cough by spilling over into the lungs. In other cases, the regurgitated fluid does contain little stomach acid and more bile, which is less irritating to the esophagus but will still stimulate cough. Medications taken to treat heartburn, such as antacids, also cause cough.

Treatment

If chronic cough is the only symptom of GERD, diagnosis may be difficult. Persistent cough associated with GERD will only end when GERD is controlled. Cough suppressants and cold medicines will not calm a GERD cough. Treatment for GERD includes antacids to neutralize excess stomach acid or H2 blockers and proton pump inhibitors. Untreated GERD can damage the esophagus, cause ulcers and potentially increase the risk of esophageal cancer.

Lifestyle Changes

Changes in diet and habits may also help relieve GERD. Spicy, fatty or acidic foods, such as tomatoes or citrus fruits, can aggravate GERD. Other contributing factors are excess weight, eating too close to bedtime, smoking, alcohol use and overeating. Eating several small meals and waiting at least 3 hours after eating before lying down will help prevent GERD.