Advice for people with Gastro Oesophageal Reflux disease

What is Gastro Oesophageal Reflux disease?
Gastro Oesophageal Reflux disease is characterised by a sharp burning pain just below the breastbone or between the shoulder blades. It generally occurs after meals or during the night.

Why does it happen?
It is caused by the reflux of your stomach contents (which contain acid) back into your food pipe (oesophagus). Sometimes this can reach as far as your mouth or be sensed at the back of your throat, causing a burning sensation.

This may be because:

- The valve (sphincter) between your stomach and oesophagus is weak.
- There is a high pressure in your abdomen (eg. due to pregnancy or obesity).
- You have a stomach ulcer.
- You have a hiatus hernia. The gap in the diaphragm through which the gullet passes is wider than normal allowing the upper stomach into the lower chest. This then allows acid to pass upwards into the gullet (see diagram). This condition is not serious and it does not cause cancer.
- You have a bacterial or viral infection.
- Sometimes reflux can occur after some operations on the stomach or oesophagus.
- Large doses and prolonged use of aspirin/ibuprofen may irritate the stomach and aggravate symptoms.
How do I reduce the symptoms?
There is no specific food or group of foods known to cause discomfort with your condition. It is important to maintain a varied and balanced diet. You only need to avoid the foods that you know cause you discomfort.

It is important that you make the recommended lifestyle and dietary changes. Your doctor may have also recommended some medication for you to take to help reduce your symptoms.

Very occasionally, if symptoms are severe and do not improve with medical treatment, it is possible to have an operation to correct a hiatus hernia. You will need to discuss this carefully with your doctor before such treatment is recommended.

Helpful advice that may reduce your symptoms

- Eat small regular meals instead of fewer larger ones. This will reduce the pressure on your stomach.
- Try not to miss meals.
- Take your time to chew properly and relax at meal times to give yourself a chance to digest the food.
- Avoid drinking with meals, as this will increase the pressure in your stomach.
- Avoid excess tea, coffee, alcohol and citrus drinks such as orange, grapefruit and tomato juice, highly flavoured spiced foods such as strong chilli and curry, and foods that are high in fat as these can irritate your stomach, increasing chances of acid reflux.
- Avoid eating late at night. This will increase the time for digestion to take place before you lie down.
- Avoid bending or lying down immediately after eating. This reduces the chance of reflux.
- Reduce your weight if you are overweight. This reduces abdominal pressure.
- If symptoms are bad at night, raise the head end of the mattress on extra pillows, or if you sleep in a single bed, raise the head end of the bed on bricks or blocks. Try sleeping in a semi upright position. This will reduce the chances of reflux during the night.
- Avoid tight fitting clothes, especially around your waist as these can cause extra pressure.
- Stop smoking.

You may find it helpful to write down everything you eat and drink for a few days and record when you suffer from reflux. This may help you to identify any particular foods that are making your symptoms worse.

Your doctor or specialist may recommend different treatment(s) depending upon the severity of your symptoms. It is important to follow the correct doses of medication and report to your doctor if there is no improvement in your symptoms.