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4321 WASHINGTON, SUITE 2020, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI 64111
{816} 531 6763 {800} 627 4360 {816} 531 4033 fax



The Truth about Antacids

Protecting Yourself from
Products that Do Away
with Stomach Acid
Part Two

Lisa Everett, Pharmacist, RPh., CCN

Contrary to popular belief, heartburn is a result of too little stomach acid, rather than too much. As we get older, our stomachs begin to lose their ability to produce stomach acid. When there's not enough stomach acid, the undigested food begins to putrefy and ferment, causing gas, bloating and back pressure, which pushes the stomach contents back up into the esophagus. We experience the pain and erosion from this process as heartburn, or acid reflux (GERD.)

For overall health, an acid stomach is a vital line of defense in the immune system—many pathogens cannot live in a 2.2-pH environment, the pH of a healthy stomach. Having a stomach pH of 2.2 is the only way we can digest proteins and minerals. Americans with gastric problems and heartburn often have a stomach pH of 6, allowing pathogens to thrive.

Antacids were developed for short-term “treatment” of peptic ulcers and GERD. First, there were the old-time antacids over the counter such as bicarbonate of soda, Tums®, Rolaids®, Mylanta® and Maalox®. Now you can choose from several generations of prescription and over the counter drugs such as Tagamet®, Zantac®,

Pepcid®, Axid®, Prilosec®, Protonix®, Prevacid®, Aciphex®, and Nexium®.

Here's the theory behind the use of antacids: stomach acid causes heartburn and its repercussions; therefore eliminating stomach acid eliminates the disease. Antacids can instantly provide short-term relief from pain. But long-term, they do not “cure” gastric issues (as evidenced by so many people taking them for years) and they have serious long-term consequences.

Even the manufacturers' literature cites a long list of side effects including:

- Nausea, constipation, flatulence, diarrhea, bloating and abdominal pain
- Arthritis and joint pain
- Muscle disease
- Skin rashes
- Decreased absorption of Vitamin B12 and other nutrients
- Hypergastrinemia—occurs in 5-10% of long-term drugs users. This increases the risk of forming gastro intestinal tract tumors.
- Headache, drowsiness and fatigue
- Confusion delirium, hallucination, blurred speech
- Some men develop breasts and women can develop leaking breasts
- Reduced sperm count and impotence in men, and birth defects
- Cell changes in the lining of the stomach
- Nerve pain
- Chest pain (angina) and serious cardiovascular events
- Kidney disease
- Stomach and duodenal cancer
- Severe hepatic disease
- Neutropenia, blood dyscrasias and reduced platelet count

Consequences of Long Term Antacid Use

In their antacid literature, the pharmaceutical industry does not include long-term physiological consequences, such as:

Malnutrition

By disrupting the normal digestive process with antacids, we cannot utilize the vitamins and proteins that depend on acid for digestion and absorption. This can lead to various forms of malnutrition, osteoporosis, cardiac arrhythmias and other degenerative diseases.

Compromising Digestive Enzyme Activity

We need stomach acid to predigest foods so the intestinal enzymes can finish the digestive process. Stomach acid stimulates the production of enzymes. Without enough enzymes, our food does not break down.

Susceptibility to Disease

The environment is filled with toxins, bacteria, fungus and viruses, which we accidentally ingest every day. Fortunately, our super-hero stomach acids usually render these pathogens and toxins harmless. But when our acids or enzymes are compromised or diminished, unwelcome bacteria and viruses can flourish. The invasion of toxins, bacteria and viruses has a direct effect on the stomach, bowel, and colon, causing Irritable Bowel Syndrome, peptic ulcers and heartburn (leading to more antacid use!), diarrhea and cramping, ulcerative colitis, and GI cancers.

Increased Allergies and Allergic Reactions

Antacids also make us more susceptible to allergens, allergic reactions, and autoimmune diseases. Without stomach acids, proteins are not broken down into amino acids. The digestive tract is designed to absorb amino acids that are from digested proteins—not whole proteins themselves. The immune system recognizes whole proteins absorbed intact as pathogenic substances and mounts an attack that can actually include some part of our natural body—an autoimmune-type response.

Increased Risks of All Types of Cancers

Without stomach acid and enough enzymes, carcinogenic toxins can build up. These toxins sit in

the GI tract and cause disruptive changes in cells. The results are polyp formation and cancer of the esophagus, colon, intestines and stomach. The carcinogens are also absorbed and carried to other parts of the body increasing the risk of breast, pancreatic, brain, liver and other forms of cancer.

Interactions between Antacids and Drugs

As a pharmacist, I see the effects of people taking antacids with other medications (an often-ignored drug interaction). Antacids have many drug interactions including anti-anxiety medications, anti-depressants, sleeping pills, blood thinners, anti-fungal agents, anti-histamines, painkillers and some antibiotics.

In addition to drug interactions, another phenomenon is taking place. Drug manufacturers and physicians assume that people who take their medications have properly functioning digestive systems. The healthy digestive system is as crucial as a healthy liver for the breakdown and metabolism of all medications. Many people don't have properly functioning digestive systems, especially if they are taking products like Prilosec! Therefore, they experience daily changes in blood levels with many drugs. This can lead to under dosing, overdosing and more drug interactions.

Finding Safe Alternatives

Our goal is to reduce the symptoms and redefine the causes of heartburn, GERD and other gastric complaints so that we can begin appropriate methods of treatment. The answer may be as close as your own refrigerator.

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Lisa Everett is a pharmacist, board-certified clinical nutritionist and co-owner of O'Brien Pharmacy and the Kansas City Holistic Centre in Kansas City, Missouri. She can be reached at 816-531-6763 or lisa@kcholistic.com. For more information visit www.obrienrx.com.