

# How GERD Impacts Heart Health

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), often dismissed as just heartburn, increases the risk of cardiovascular problems like high blood pressure and heart attacks
- › GERD triggers chronic inflammation, which damages blood vessels and contributes to heart disease
- › Research suggests that GERD also increases your risk of developing irregular heartbeats (arrhythmias)
- › Common GERD medications like proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) have serious side effects and worsen the underlying problem long-term
- › Lifestyle changes, including optimizing your mitochondrial function to boost cellular energy, dietary adjustments and natural remedies often effectively manage GERD and protect heart health

Imagine waking up in the middle of the night with a burning sensation in your chest. You might think it's a heart attack, but it could be something else entirely: GERD. GERD, or gastroesophageal reflux disease, is a common condition where stomach acid flows back up into your esophagus, the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach.

Think of it like a leaky faucet; there's a valve between your stomach and esophagus that's supposed to keep things flowing in one direction. In GERD, this valve, called the lower esophageal sphincter, doesn't work properly, allowing acid to escape upward. While often seen as just a nuisance, emerging research suggests that GERD might be

linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular problems like heart disease. Understanding this connection is important for protecting your overall health.

## **GERD Is More Than Just Heartburn**

To understand GERD, it helps to visualize how your digestive system works. Between your stomach and esophagus is a ring of muscle called the lower esophageal sphincter (LES). This valve opens to let food pass into your stomach and closes to prevent stomach acid from splashing back up. When your LES weakens or relaxes inappropriately, stomach acid escapes, leading to the burning sensation known as heartburn.

Other common symptoms of GERD include regurgitation, where you taste stomach contents in your mouth, and chest pain, which is sometimes mistaken for a heart attack. While many people experience occasional acid reflux, especially after a big meal, frequent episodes (more than twice a week) might signal chronic GERD, a condition that requires medical attention.

Several factors increase your risk of developing GERD. Lifestyle factors like obesity, smoking and a diet high in processed fatty foods, caffeine and alcohol all contribute to a weakened LES. Certain medical conditions, such as hiatal hernias – where part of your stomach pushes up through your diaphragm – also make you more susceptible. Additionally, some medications, including those for asthma and high blood pressure, worsen GERD symptoms.

If left untreated, chronic GERD leads to serious complications. The constant exposure to stomach acid irritates and damages the lining of your esophagus, leading to a condition called esophagitis. Over time, this causes scarring and narrowing of your esophagus, making it difficult to swallow.

In some cases, chronic inflammation leads to Barrett's esophagus, a precancerous condition that increases your risk of esophageal cancer. Early diagnosis and management of GERD are important to prevent these complications. The link between

GERD and heart health might seem surprising at first, but it becomes clearer when you consider the role of inflammation.

GERD triggers a chronic inflammatory response in your body, and this inflammation often extends beyond your esophagus, impacting other organs, including your heart and blood vessels. Moreover, GERD and heart disease share some common risk factors, such as obesity and smoking, further strengthening the connection.

## **GERD Increases Cardiovascular Risk Factors**

While GERD is commonly associated with unpleasant symptoms like heartburn and acid reflux, research suggests that GERD could be silently increasing your risk of serious heart-related issues. A study published in the *Journal of Translational Internal Medicine* investigated the relationship between GERD and cardiovascular health.<sup>1</sup>

Utilizing a method called Mendelian randomization, researchers explored how genetic factors linked to GERD influence various heart health indicators. They discovered that people with a genetic predisposition to GERD have higher blood pressure levels, altered cholesterol profiles and an increased risk of heart attacks and high blood pressure.

Think about your blood pressure – the force of blood pushing against your artery walls. The study revealed that those genetically inclined to GERD tend to have elevated systolic and diastolic blood pressure. This isn't just a minor effect; higher blood pressure is a well-known risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

Additionally, the research showed significant changes in cholesterol levels. Low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol was higher in individuals with GERD, while high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol was lower. But the story doesn't end there.

The study also highlighted a direct link between GERD and an increased likelihood of experiencing a myocardial infarction, commonly known as a heart attack. With an odds ratio of 1.272, individuals with a genetic tendency toward GERD were over 27% more likely to suffer a heart attack compared to those without.

## **How GERD Elevates Your Heart Disease Risk**

Understanding the connection between GERD and heart health might seem complex, but breaking it down reveals a clear pathway of risk. When GERD causes frequent acid reflux, it doesn't just irritate your esophagus; it triggers systemic inflammation throughout your body.

This chronic inflammation is a key player in the development of atherosclerosis, where arteries become narrowed and hardened due to plaque buildup. Over time, this leads to restricted blood flow, making your heart work harder and increasing the chances of heart attacks and strokes.

Additionally, the increased blood pressure linked to GERD puts extra strain on your heart, pushing it toward hypertensive conditions that lead to severe complications if left unmanaged. The study's findings also shed light on the mediating factors that bridge GERD and heart disease.

High blood pressure was identified as a significant mediator, accounting for over 35% of the increased risk of myocardial infarction in individuals with GERD.<sup>2</sup> This means that controlling your blood pressure substantially mitigates the heightened heart disease risk posed by GERD.

If you suffer from GERD, it's important to recognize that its impact extends beyond mere discomfort. Proactive management of GERD symptoms, along with addressing its underlying causes, plays an important role in safeguarding your heart health.

## **GERD Increases Risk of Arrhythmias and High Blood Pressure**

While the connection between GERD and general heart health has been explored, additional research investigated how GERD specifically affects heart rhythm. A study published in *Frontiers in Cardiovascular Medicine* researched the relationship between GERD and arrhythmias, which are irregular heartbeats that lead to serious health issues.<sup>3</sup>

Arrhythmias, such as **atrial fibrillation** and paroxysmal tachycardia, are common cardiovascular disorders that affect millions worldwide. The study also used Mendelian randomization, using genetic information to determine whether there is a causal relationship between two conditions.

By analyzing genetic variations associated with GERD and their impact on the risk of developing different types of arrhythmias, researchers aimed to uncover whether GERD directly contributes to heart rhythm problems. This approach helps eliminate confounding factors that often complicate observational studies, providing more reliable insights into the relationship between GERD and arrhythmias.

The researchers discovered that individuals with a genetic predisposition to GERD have a 34% higher risk of developing paroxysmal tachycardia, a type of arrhythmia characterized by sudden episodes of rapid heart rate.<sup>4</sup> These results highlight the importance of monitoring heart health in individuals with GERD. Paroxysmal tachycardia leads to symptoms such as dizziness, shortness of breath and even fainting, which significantly affect a person's quality of life.

While the link between GERD and arrhythmias sheds light on one aspect of heart health, another significant connection exists between GERD and high blood pressure. A study published in the World Journal of Clinical Cases revealed individuals with a genetic predisposition to GERD have a 46% higher risk of developing essential high blood pressure.<sup>5</sup>

The study also revealed that GERD is associated with an increased risk of hypertensive heart disease, a condition where high blood pressure damages your heart muscle. This further emphasizes the interconnectedness of your digestive and cardiovascular systems. By addressing GERD proactively, you reduce your risk of developing severe heart conditions.

## **Why Medications for GERD Often Backfire**

Medications are often used to manage GERD symptoms, but the symptom relief they provide comes along with a serious risk of side effects. **Antacids** neutralize stomach acid. H2 blockers reduce the amount of acid your stomach produces, while **proton pump inhibitors** (PPIs) block acid production. PPIs are associated with a number of adverse effects, however, including:<sup>6</sup>

- Osteoporosis and related fractures
- Community-acquired pneumonia
- Clostridium difficile colitis
- Cardiovascular morbidity
- Hypomagnesemia, or low magnesium levels

Further, it's important to understand that medications like PPIs often create more problems than they solve. PPIs work by blocking the production of stomach acid. However, contrary to popular belief, GERD symptoms like heartburn are usually caused by having too little stomach acid, not too much. So, taking a PPI actually worsens the underlying issue by further reducing your stomach acid levels.

**Stomach acid** plays an essential role in digesting the protein you eat. When acid levels are low, your body struggles to break down protein properly, which leads to poor nutrient absorption and an imbalance in your gut bacteria (dysbiosis). Undigested protein ferment in your gut, providing fuel for harmful pathogens like Candida, C. difficile and H. pylori.

Another concern with PPIs is that they often lead to both tolerance and dependence, making it challenging to stop taking them. When you stop taking PPIs, you're likely to experience rebound symptoms, which persist until your stomach acid levels return to normal and your LES functions correctly. In some cases, particularly with long-term PPI use, this process takes up to two years.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, it's important not to stop taking PPIs abruptly. Instead, work with your health care provider to gradually reduce your dosage while incorporating natural strategies to

address the root cause of your GERD. Once you've tapered down to the lowest dose of the PPI, consider switching to an over-the-counter H2 blocker like Pepcid (famotidine), which is generally considered a safer option. Then, gradually wean off the H2 blocker over the following weeks.

## How to Manage GERD Effectively

Fortunately, there are many ways to manage GERD and reduce its impact on your heart health. Because stomach acid production requires a lot of energy, ensure your **mitochondria are working optimally**, which enhances your cellular energy.

In addition to optimizing your mitochondrial function, consuming hydrogen-rich foods, such as fresh fruits, vegetables and proteins, and chloride-rich foods, such as salt, tomatoes, lettuce, celery and olives, provides the dietary sources for your body to make stomach acid. Consuming sauerkraut or cabbage juice will also stimulate your body to produce stomach acid.

Further, your stomach needs zinc to produce stomach acid, so make sure your body has the necessary raw ingredients. Zinc-rich foods include oysters, lobster, beef and raw yogurt.

**Consuming bitters** is useful for stimulating the secretion of hydrochloric acid, while, in cases of low stomach acid, consider a betaine HCl – the hydrochloride salt of betaine – supplement before meals, using gradually increasing doses until an uncomfortable sensation occurs.<sup>8</sup>

Another option is to take 1 tablespoon of raw unfiltered apple cider vinegar in a large glass of water before or directly after meals. Lifestyle modifications also play a key role. Maintaining a healthy weight through a balanced diet and regular exercise significantly reduces reflux episodes. Avoiding trigger foods like fried foods, spicy dishes, caffeine and alcohol also makes a big difference.

Quitting smoking and limiting **alcohol consumption** are essential, as these habits weaken your LES and worsen GERD. Stress management techniques, such as meditation

and yoga, also help reduce symptoms. In addition, when compared to a placebo, astaxanthin, a potent antioxidant, was found to reduce symptoms of acid reflux, especially for individuals with pronounced H. pylori infection. The researchers concluded a daily dose of 40 mg of [astaxanthin](#) was effective for reflux reduction.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1, 2</sup> [Journal of Translational Internal Medicine November 6, 2024](#)
- <sup>3, 4</sup> [Frontiers in Cardiovascular Medicine July 28, 2024](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [World Journal of Clinical Cases February 16, 2024; 12\(5\):880-890](#)
- <sup>6</sup> [BMJ Open. 2020; 10\(11\): e040473, Introduction](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [Midwestern Doctor Substack September 16, 2023](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [Integr Med February 2020; 19\(1\): 32-36](#)