Heartburn, acid reflux, GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) are all names for essentially the same condition: the seepage of stomach acid into the esophagus. The esophagus is the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach. Its purpose is to simply transport food. The stomach on the other hand is designed to break down food or to liquify it so that it can be further processed in the intestines and the water and nutrients absorbed into the blood stream.

The primary chemical produced by the stomach to digest food is hydrochloric acid. Among other things, hydrochloric acid dissolves protein. All tissues in the body are made of protein, so it would stand to reason that stomach acid would dissolve them as well. Fortunately, the cells that line the stomach are specifically designed to resist this effect.

The cells that line the esophagus, however, have no such protection. If acid passes back up into the esophagus, the lining can erode. This can cause pain, scarring and even lead to cancer in the esophagus.

Effective treatments for heartburn have been around for decades and perhaps even centuries. Acids are neutralized by alkaline substances such as bicarbonate of soda (baking soda). Simply taking an antacid will neutralize the stomach acid. Many popular medications such as Tums and Rolaids work in this fashion.

While these medications are effective in reducing heartburn, they are short lived, because the stomach will quickly make more acid. Newer medications, although not as fast acting, last longer. These medications work by inhibiting the production of the acid. Some new products combine both types in order to offer rapid symptom improvement as well as prolonged action.

While these medications are normally well tolerated, there are negative effects that few doctors discuss with their patients and the television ads never reveal. In my next article, I will review these negative effects that are potentially causing significant health issues for hundreds of thousands of individual who take these medications regularly.