

Thanks to the hundreds of commercials most of us see selling medications for heart burn, many people believe that acid in the stomach is a bad thing. It is, in fact, necessary to our very survival. Hydrochloric acid is produced by cells that line the stomach wall. This acid is used by the body to assist in digestion of the food that we eat. Stomach acid is also responsible for killing many of the germs that we inadvertently, but inevitably swallow.

Stomach acid helps to turn solid food into a liquid slurry that is then ejected into the small intestines where nutrients are extracted and absorbed into the blood stream. The cells that line the stomach cavity are resistant to the digestive effect of hydrochloric acid. Unfortunately the cells that line the esophagus are not.

The esophagus is the long tube that runs from the back of the mouth to the stomach. If acid enters the esophagus, it will damage the lining resulting in a burning sensation. This is usually felt in the chest which is why it is called heart burn even though it has nothing to do with the heart.

Medications that are used to treat heartburn come in two varieties. The oldest and quickest acting have been around in one form or another for decades. They work by neutralizing the acid. Newer medications work by inhibiting the stomach's production of acid. These take a little longer to relieve the symptoms, but they tend to last longer.

Unfortunately, neither addresses the underlying cause of the problem and can potentially have long term negative health effects. Consider that if there is no acid in the stomach then the food will not digest properly. If the food does not digest properly, then the body will absorb fewer nutrients in each meal. The carbohydrates and fats will still be absorbed, because digestion of these substances don't require acid, but the digestion of proteins and many vitamins and minerals are dependent upon the stomach acid. As a result, we gain weight, but at the same time we are slowly starving to death.

Additionally, if there is no stomach acid, harmful germs can pass through the stomach's defense barrier and enter the intestines where they can cause illness and putrefaction or rotting of the food, which may result in the absorption of toxins into the blood stream.

Stomach acid is imperative to good health, but it is also a significant problem for many people when it slips into the esophagus. Next week I will discuss alternative treatments that may help eliminate the cause of this common problem.

Heartburn is not supposed to occur, but when it does it isn't the acid's fault. The problem lies with the muscular valve that is supposed to prevent acid from squeezing from the stomach into the esophagus. If this valve malfunctions, then it can no longer keep the acid in the stomach where it belongs. In fact, as we age, the acid producing cells become less efficient and do not produce enough hydrochloric acid. So if anything, many of us have too little acid in our stomachs, rather than too much.