

HEARTBURN IN PREGNANCY

Heartburn and gas are common in pregnancy due to the growing baby pressing against the mother's intestine and stomach. A side effect of high levels of pregnancy hormones such as progesterone is that the peristaltic contractions of the digestive tract are slowed down, causing food to remain longer in the system, thus fermenting and producing gas. Heartburn occurs when a sphincter at the opening of the stomach relaxes (those hormones again!) and acids from the stomach backs up into the lower end of the esophagus causing pain and inflammation. Heartburn doesn't actually involve the heart, and is considered to be a more or less "normal" part of pregnancy. But, if you think the pain you are experiencing might be something other than heartburn, contact your caregiver immediately.

Heartburn can get to be quite painful and distressing, especially in late pregnancy before the baby "drops" down into the pelvis (at which point the baby then presses on the bladder and you feel you need to urinate frequently). Babies who are breech can cause added heartburn because the large, bony head is pressing up against the stomach. Women with multiple babies (twins, triplets) may find heartburn worse than with a single baby.

Over the counter remedies for heartburn can be effective. Antacids (Tums, Rolaids) work to neutralize hydrochloric acid in the stomach, which relieves the pain, but interferes with digestion. They also may contain poorly assimilated forms of calcium. Liquid forms of Gaviscon and Maalox often work well because they coat the digestive tract. Antacids that contain magnesium and aluminum hydroxides impair the absorption of iron. Alka-Seltzer contains aspirin and should not be used, especially close to the due date. Aspirin interferes with prostaglandin production (needed for the proper hormonal functions of labour) and platelet function (the ability of the blood to clot). Baking soda upsets the acid-base balance, can cause maternal swelling due to high levels of sodium and can be harmful to the baby.

Heartburn can be helped by aiding proper digestion of foods:

- Eat small meals frequently. Carry a bag of nuts and dried fruit with you when out.
- Chew thoroughly and eat slowly.
- Do not drink while eating. Drink plenty between meals. Lemon in water may help.
- Walk after meals or at least avoid lying down after meals. Avoid eating before bedtime.
- Avoid greasy and highly seasoned foods. Food high in fat (meat, dairy) can be upsetting to some women. Notice what affects you.
- Coffee and cigarettes increase heartburn by irritating the stomach.
- Alcohol may increase heartburn by slowing down the digestive process.

Foods that may be helpful:

- Plain baked potato
- Yogourt (1-3 cups per day)
- Milk or milk products (some women find that milk boiled or microwaved is helpful);
- Thoroughly chewed raw almonds or cashews.
- Fresh papaya or papaya juice (also apple peel, organic orange peel, pineapple).
- Anise, Fennel or Bancha tea after meals.

Supplements that may be helpful:

- Papaya enzyme tablets called Frutin
- Digestive enzyme tablets
- Slippery Elm throat lozenges or powdered and taken in capsules. It helps to neutralize stomach acid and absorb intestinal gas.

Other:

- "Fly" to help the stomach settle: sit cross-legged and raise and lower your arms quickly, bringing the backs of your hands together over your head.
- Sleep with many pillows to prop as upright as needed. Some women need to sleep almost sitting up.