

A burning issue

If you're still plagued by heartburn and acid reflux long after seasonal leftovers have been eaten, it's time to see the doctor – there are new treatments on offer

by PATSY WESTCOTT

Many of us are familiar with the burning chest pain and acidic taste that signals heartburn and reflux. Indeed, so common are they that they're the most searched-for terms on the NHS website at this time of year. NHS Digital recorded 13,200 visits to the NHS heartburn and reflux webpage – one every 13 minutes – last Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

The odd bout of heartburn following a heavy meal like Christmas dinner is nothing to worry about, but persistent symptoms should be checked, as prolonged heartburn, called GORD (gastro-oesophageal reflux disease), can increase your risk of cancer of the oesophagus.

'GORD is relatively common – affecting one in ten people. It's more common with age and with risk factors such as obesity, stress, smoking, alcohol and asthma,' says consultant gastroenterologist and interventional endoscopist Dr Rehan Haidry, from University College Hospital, London.

Prolonged exposure to stomach acid can damage the inner lining of the oesophagus, leading to a pre-cancerous condition called Barrett's oesophagus. Around 500,000 people in the UK are affected, with 3-13% of these developing oesophageal cancer. Almost three



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in five (59%) cases of oesophageal cancer are preventable, but it is currently one of the deadliest forms of the disease, with 8,000 deaths a year.

'People often dismiss heartburn as nothing to worry about and keep popping over-the-counter indigestion remedies, meaning they are not diagnosed until it's too late,' says Fiona Labrooy of Heartburn Cancer UK.

The charity is pressing for the adoption of the capsule sponge test to detect Barrett's oesophagus and is funding two mobile units

to offer the test as part of large-scale studies. The test consists of a pill on a strong thread that is swallowed. This releases a small sponge, which takes a cell sample from the oesophagus. Research suggests it can identify ten times more cases of Barrett's than current GP care.

'The beauty is it can be done in the GP's surgery or community setting, avoiding the need for an invasive endoscopy,' says original inventor Professor Rebecca Fitzgerald of the Cancer Research UK Cambridge Centre and University of Cambridge's Early Cancer Institute.

The test is currently being piloted across the UK; more than 16,000 have been performed, and one day it's hoped it will be rolled out on the NHS as a routine diagnostic test. A trial will begin in early 2024.

Could your indigestion be something more serious?

'There's a spectrum of disease that can vary dramatically from person to person,' says Paul Goldsmith, consultant general surgeon at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust. 'Most people report a bit of heartburn that's worse after a large meal or a glass of red wine but goes away. However, symptoms can worsen over time.'

For the occasional episode, lifestyle changes and over-the-counter remedies such as Rennie, Milk of Magnesia or Gaviscon can do the trick. But they are not for long-term use.

'If symptoms such as heartburn and reflux, indigestion, hiccups, an unpleasant taste, difficulty or pain swallowing food, food getting stuck in your oesophagus, frequently being sick or unintentional weight loss persist for three weeks or longer, see the doctor,' says Julie Thompson at Guts UK charity.

What are your options?

Proton pump inhibitors (PPI), such as omeprazole, which work by blocking enzymes in the lining of your stomach that help make acid, are the first line of treatment. Despite recent reports of these increasing the risk of dementia, Thompson says, 'There is no statistically increased risk of dementia in large groups of people who have taken them over ten to 20 years.'

If PPIs don't work or you don't want to take them, medications called H2 blockers may be prescribed. A new generation of PPIs called potassium-competitive acid blockers (P-CABs) or acid pump antagonists (APAs) are on the horizon. For

severe or ongoing GORD, surgery is an option. The most common procedure is an operation called fundoplication. 'It involves taking a part of the stomach, the fundus, and wrapping it around the oesophagus,' explains Goldsmith. 'It's been around a long time and is a good procedure. But half of patients will experience a return of symptoms within ten years and around 15% need a repeat procedure.'

A knife-free version, transoral incisionless fundoplication (TIF) – performed via endoscopy – is available privately but is not approved by the government body NICE. 'Around 80% no longer need heartburn medication,' says Dr Haidry, who offers the operation at London's private Cleveland Clinic.

A newer surgical procedure, LINX, which is approved by NICE, involves placing a ring of magnets at the bottom of the oesophagus. When you swallow, the magnetic force is overcome, allowing the ring to open. Magnetic attraction then brings the beads together again, closing the oesophagus and stopping the backflow of acid.

New developments

There's also a new, minimally invasive procedure available for certain patients: RefluxStop. It involves implanting a silicone ball about the size of a ping-pong ball in a pocket created in the stomach wall next to the oesophagus.

'It works by recreating the anatomy of the oesophagus and stomach and reinforcing the top part of the stomach,' explains Goldsmith, who offers the operation privately – the only way you can currently have it done, though four NHS patients with severe GORD and oesophageal motility problems recently received it as part of a study. It's hoped it will one day be offered on the NHS.

In the meantime, one of the first beneficiaries was veterinary surgeon Peter van Eijk, 74, from Durham, who has suffered from severe heartburn and reflux since 2001. He paid £12,000 for his operation and says he is at last able to enjoy his meals.

'I love my food and the odd glass of wine. Now, for the first time in years, I no longer have to take medication to quell the after-effects. I've always been healthy and fit, and this has given me my life back – worth every penny. Roll on Christmas dinner!' 🍷

For more information, see *Oesophageal Patients Association* (opa.org.uk)



February is Oesophageal Cancer Awareness Month, and Heartburn Cancer UK is offering free capsule sponge tests at a mobile unit based at London's Lanesborough Hotel in partnership with Cyted and the Cleveland Clinic, for those who meet certain criteria. See heartburncanceruk.org