

Managing gastroesophageal reflux disorder: Lifestyle changes for better health.

Joan Vela*

Department of Pediatrics, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia

Introduction

Gastroesophageal reflux disorder (GERD) is a chronic condition characterized by the backward flow of stomach acid into the esophagus, causing symptoms such as heartburn, regurgitation, and discomfort. Managing GERD effectively often requires a combination of medical treatment and lifestyle changes. While medications can alleviate symptoms and promote healing, lifestyle modifications play a crucial role in managing GERD and improving overall health [1].

Dietary changes are among the most important lifestyle adjustments for managing GERD. Certain foods and beverages can trigger or worsen symptoms by relaxing the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), the muscle that acts as a barrier between the stomach and the esophagus. Foods high in fat, such as fried foods, dairy products, and fatty meats, can delay stomach emptying and increase the likelihood of acid reflux. Spicy foods, citrus fruits, tomatoes, chocolate, caffeine, and alcohol can also irritate the esophagus and should be consumed in moderation or avoided altogether [2].

Eating habits can significantly impact GERD symptoms. Eating smaller, more frequent meals instead of large meals can help reduce pressure on the LES and prevent acid reflux. It is also advisable to eat slowly and chew food thoroughly to aid digestion. Avoiding late-night meals and snacks is crucial, as lying down shortly after eating can exacerbate GERD symptoms. Ideally, meals should be consumed at least two to three hours before bedtime to allow time for digestion [3].

Weight management is another critical aspect of managing GERD. Excess body weight, particularly around the abdomen, can increase pressure on the stomach and LES, leading to acid reflux. Losing weight through a combination of a healthy diet and regular exercise can help reduce GERD symptoms and improve overall health. Aiming for a gradual weight loss of 1-2 pounds per week is generally considered safe and sustainable [4].

Elevating the head of the bed can be an effective way to manage nighttime GERD symptoms. By raising the head of the bed by six to eight inches, gravity helps keep stomach acid from flowing back into the esophagus. This can be achieved by using bed risers, placing a wedge pillow under the mattress, or using a specialized GERD pillow. Simply using extra pillows to prop up the head and shoulders is usually not effective, as it can put strain on the neck and back [5].

Smoking cessation is essential for individuals with GERD. Smoking weakens the LES, reduces saliva production (which helps neutralize stomach acid), and increases stomach acid production. Quitting smoking can significantly improve GERD symptoms and reduce the risk of complications such as esophagitis, Barrett's esophagus, and esophageal cancer. Seeking support through smoking cessation programs, counseling, or medications can increase the chances of successfully quitting [6].

Stress management techniques can also help alleviate GERD symptoms. Stress and anxiety can increase stomach acid production and exacerbate GERD. Practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, or progressive muscle relaxation can help reduce stress levels and improve overall well-being. Regular physical activity, such as walking, swimming, or cycling, can also help manage stress and promote digestive health [7].

Certain medications can contribute to GERD symptoms by relaxing the LES or irritating the esophagus. Common culprits include nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), certain blood pressure medications, and some muscle relaxants. If you suspect that a medication is worsening your GERD symptoms, consult your healthcare provider. They may be able to adjust your medication regimen or recommend alternatives that are less likely to cause reflux [8].

Probiotics and other supplements may offer some benefits for individuals with GERD. Probiotics, which are beneficial bacteria that support gut health, can help balance the digestive system and reduce symptoms of acid reflux. Supplements such as digestive enzymes, ginger, and aloe vera may also provide relief for some individuals. However, it is important to consult with a healthcare provider before starting any new supplements, as they can interact with medications and have side effects [9].

Alcohol consumption should be limited for individuals with GERD, as it can relax the LES and increase stomach acid production. If you choose to drink alcohol, it is best to do so in moderation and avoid beverages that are more likely to trigger reflux, such as red wine and beer. Drinking alcohol with food can help reduce its impact on the LES and minimize the risk of acid reflux [10].

*Correspondence to: Joan Vela, Department of Pediatrics, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia. E-mail: vela@up.pa.in

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Conclusion

Managing GERD effectively requires a multifaceted approach that includes dietary modifications, weight management, lifestyle changes, and stress reduction. By making these adjustments, individuals with GERD can reduce symptoms, improve their quality of life, and promote better overall health. It is important to work closely with a healthcare provider to develop a personalized management plan and address any underlying health issues contributing to GERD. With the right strategies in place, it is possible to control GERD symptoms and enjoy a healthier, more comfortable life.

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