

HERBAL TREATMENT OF “HEARTBURN”

Q.

I have a tendency to suffer from heartburn which seems to happen more often recently. What do you recommend?

A.

First of all, have you been checked by your G.P. to rule out any serious conditions such as heart disease, stomach ulcers, hiatus hernia or musculo-skeletal problem?

Heartburn is caused by stomach acids leaking up into the oesophagus (the “tube” your food goes down) because the special “valve” between your stomach and oesophagus is faulty. This “valve” or sphincter opens to allow food into your stomach and immediately closes to stop stomach acid coming up. The burning feeling you get is due to the acid.

Diet and lifestyle changes can help. You say it is happening more often recently. It may be that over the festive season you have been over-indulging in food and drink. Fried foods and saturated fats, sugar and chocolate, fizzy drinks, alcohol and coffee, and some medicines for high blood pressure, heart disease or asthma can all affect the tone of the sphincter and result in heartburn. Citrus fruits, spicy foods, tomatoes and some pain killers can directly irritate the oesophagus. Smoking makes it worse. Perhaps you are eating large meals too soon before bedtime – reduce the portions and try not to eat within two hours of going to bed. When you do eat, chew your food thoroughly, don’t rush but sit down and relax so that you think about what you are eating and enjoy it better.

Herbs.

Plants that contain a substance called mucilage help to sooth inflammation in the digestive tract. Slippery Elm is one such herb. The usual way to take it is in powder form mixed with water. Another particularly beneficial one is Meadowsweet. It relieves pain and reduces acidity, and protects and heals the upper part of the digestive system. The drug, aspirin, was originally derived from Meadowsweet in the 19th century. The plant has the pain-relieving properties of aspirin but does not upset the stomach partly due to the mucilage it contains. Irish Moss, Marshmallow root and Plantain are other herbs that have high mucilage content. Bilberry fruit contains a substance called tannin that is also found in ordinary black tea. Bilberry is excellent for reducing inflammation caused by stomach acid and it repairs the lining of the oesophagus.

The best way to take these herbs is to make an infusion or tea after meals. (Ideally, roots and moss should be boiled for a few minutes). Pour a cup of boiling water over two teaspoons of dried herbs, cover it, and leave to

infuse for 10 minutes before straining and drinking. If you use a cafetiere it saves having to strain the liquid. I would suggest you also add Chamomile to the infusion/tea as it is one of the best herbs for the digestion in general and will ease pain by reducing inflammation and help you relax.

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December 2009