

Acid Reflux and Rebellious Stomach: Killing the Messenger for Profit

By Simon Yu, MD

Awareness of acid reflux and promotion of anti-acid medications have reached a new height for the public. This has been stimulated by clever commercial advertisements in the media and through medical educational promotions in major medical journals.

Acid reflux has been blamed for atypical chest pain, asthma, nocturnal coughing, indigestion, and heart burn. Acid reflux medications have even been promoted for children with unexplainable stomach cramps and pains.

So, what is acid reflux? Acid reflux is new terminology for a century old problem which people described as having heart burn or a burning sensation spreading upward from the chest. Acupuncturists have described the symptoms as a “rebellious stomach” in a poetic metaphor. GERD (gastro-esophageal reflux disease) is another name for acid reflux.

The stomach produces hydrochloric acid to digest foods. The slick TV commercials lead us to believe that the stomach produces too much acid. By doing so it creates the symptoms of heart burn such as the feeling of “a fire in the chest.” These commercials claim the solution is to use all kinds of anti-acids, including H-2 blockers or proton pump inhibitors (PPI), to “put out the fire.”

Most people will feel better by this cover-up. So they continue to indulge on their favorite foods while pharmaceutical companies are making handsome profits. Everybody is happy or so it seems. But are anti-acids truly good for your body?

Heartburn is like a messenger telling your body that something is wrong, yelling “the fire is out of control!” Your body is asking for help to correct the unsuspected problems. The underlying problems might be a complex, inter-related disturbance in your organ functions. Too much acid, though, is not usually the cause.

Contrary to the conventional medical belief system, most people have *insufficient* hydrochloric acid. This *insufficiency*, not an overabundance, is the culprit for indigestion, sluggish motility of the stomach, bloating and backing up to the esophagus.

These conditions then cause those uncomfortable, and sometimes painful, reactions of heartburn and fire in the chest. If you have sufficient hydrochloric acid you have complete digestion, proper activity in the stomach, and there isn't any backup of food or acid reflux to the esophagus.

At this stage, you have several choices of treatment. You may take anti-acid medications to temporarily relieve the heart burn or take stomach enzymes which contain hydrochloric acid to improve your digestion. If there is actual damage to the lining of the stomach or esophagus, you may have to use both anti-acids and stomach enzymes. At this point, use stomach enzymes mildly so as not to irritate the lining of the gut and allow it time to heal.

Taking the anti-acid medication is understandable for temporary relief of heart burn. However, taking these medications daily, so that you can indulge on your favorite food, is like ignoring and finally killing the messenger. The “messenger”, that is, the symptoms of heartburn and “fire” in the chest, keep warning you to fix the actual underlying problems. If you keep ignoring the messenger you could be in for much deeper and more extensive trouble years down the road.

Without the proper secretion of hydrochloric acid in the stomach, harmful bacteria, parasite eggs and fungus embedded in the food can survive. These “health destroyers” will ensure poor digestion and gradual deterioration of the gut’s immune system (dysbiosis or leaky gut syndrome). They will cause an invasion of multiple related problems including candidiasis, food allergies, irritable bowel like syndrome, exacerbation of acid reflux (GERD) and ulcer. It also hosts incurable pains and seemingly unrelated medical problems.

At this stage, you will be visiting one doctor after another, one specialist after another specialist, without diagnosis or favorable outcome. Sound familiar? Eventually you come to the conclusion “my doctor said everything is fine but why do I feel so bad?”

You may get disgusted with the medical system. You will be highly susceptible to all kinds of hype and claims of unconventional medical miracles from your neighbors and co-workers selling their latest miracle nutritional products. Sound familiar again?

What would you do at this vulnerable stage of your life? Don’t despair. Stop taking daily anti-acid medication and only use it on an as-needed basis. One very good option is to start taking organic apple cider vinegar before meals (one teaspoon to one table spoon per meal). Instead of organic apple cider vinegar, you can take hydrochloric acid tablets before starting your meals. At the same time, add digestive enzymes to improve your digestion.

I use seven different types of digestive enzymes for individualized treatment in my practice. Take probiotics and Pepto-Bismol as necessary. Follow the usual recommendations: eat small meals, don’t lie down until fully digested, elevate the bed to minimize the reflux, avoid all the foods that tend to aggravate like tomatoes, mints, coffee, etc.

For the most difficult cases of acid reflux, always consider bacterial or parasitic infestation as a culprit. If these are factors affecting your body, appropriate use of antibiotics or parasite medications can give you a dramatic response. Interestingly, according to the Acupuncture Meridian Assessment (see the “Articles” page on my web site for an article on this topic), the origin of the problem is often not located in the stomach but usually in the pancreas, gallbladder, liver or small intestine.

In summary, when you experience heartburn and acid reflux, listen to the messenger. Please, don’t kill the messenger! Your messenger is warning you that the rebellious stomach is coming after you. However, the real problems are coming from deeper levels of organ dysfunctions. Killing the messenger with anti-acid medications only benefits someone else’s profits and reverses the fortune of your health.

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