

Heartburn and indigestion

Heartburn is a burning feeling behind the breastbone. It can be very painful. It is caused when acid from the stomach irritates the lining of the gullet (oesophagus).

Indigestion is discomfort in the upper part of the tummy (abdomen). It usually happens after meals. It can happen when stomach acid irritates the lining of the stomach or small bowel.

Some drugs (such as [steroids](#) or anti-inflammatory painkillers) and some cancer treatments (such as [chemotherapy](#)) can also irritate the stomach lining.

You may get indigestion if you do not eat or drink much, have a small stomach capacity or do not move around very much.

Tips for managing heartburn and indigestion

- There are medicines that can help. Your GP or cancer doctor can suggest what might be best for you.
- Make a note of any foods that cause discomfort so you can avoid them.
- Large meals can make you feel uncomfortable. Specific foods that are known to cause problems include chocolate, alcohol, fatty and spicy foods, fizzy drinks, chewing gum, hard-boiled sweets, and mints. You may want to limit or avoid these.
- When symptoms have settled, you can try reintroducing foods that you have been avoiding. This is to help you have a healthy balanced diet. Add one type of food back at a time, and start with small quantities.
- Wear loose clothing around your waist.
- Limit activity for at least 45 to 60 minutes after eating.
- Try not to lie flat on your back, especially after meals. Use extra pillows in bed, or raise the head of the bed by a few inches.
- If you get a lot of indigestion at night, avoid eating a meal (or drinking tea or coffee) 3 to 4 hours before bed.
- Try to keep to a [healthy weight](#).
- If you smoke, try to [stop or cut down](#). The chemicals in cigarette smoke may make indigestion worse. The NHS has a lot of information and support to help you give up smoking. Look on the NHS website for the country where you live.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on be.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- [Eating problems and cancer](#)
- [Healthy eating and cancer.](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk where you can [chat to us online](#).

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#).

Other useful contact details

- Guts UK – visit www.gutscharity.org.uk
- Oesophageal Patients Association – visit www.opa.org.uk
- British Dietetic Association – visit www.bda.uk.com

Notes and questions
