

Healthy You

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 **Lehigh Valley Health Network**

Acid Reflux in Children

What to do if your child has it



For a few weeks in a row, your child has complained of pain in her chest after eating. You've noticed it seems to be worse after she eats certain foods or lies down after a meal. Could she have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)?

It's possible. GERD is the upward flow of stomach contents and acid into the esophagus and sometimes into the mouth. It's caused by any condition that relaxes the muscular valve between the stomach and esophagus.

Commonly seen in adults, GERD also can occur in infants and older children. Infants often develop GERD because they have an immature digestive system. Obesity, overeating, certain medications, and certain foods and beverages can make the condition worse in older children.

So how do you know if your child has GERD? Although most infants occasionally spit up throughout the day, infants with GERD will become irritable or cry afterward. "The acid coming back up is painful," says pediatrician Moshe Markowitz, MD, with Lehigh Valley Health Network. Infants also may overfeed in an attempt to neutralize the acid in their stomachs.

Older children may point to their chest or verbalize the pain they feel. "Children often say they feel burning in their chest," says health network pediatric gastroenterologist Ayman Abdel-Wahab, MD. "They also may vomit or have difficulty swallowing."

Your doctor often will diagnose GERD based on your child's medical history and physical exam. If needed, your doctor may perform a pH probe test to measure the level of acid in your child's esophagus, or an endoscopy to look inside the esophagus.

If your child is diagnosed with GERD, there is help. "We try conservative care first," Abdel-Wahab says. For infants, this may include elevating the head of your baby's crib and holding your baby upright for 30 minutes after feeding. "You also can try switching to a formula that's easier to digest," Markowitz says.

If these steps don't relieve your baby's symptoms, your doctor may recommend medication to neutralize or decrease stomach acid. The good news—many infants outgrow GERD by the time they are 1 year old and their digestive system matures.

For older children, conservative care may involve losing excess weight, not eating late at night, staying upright for at least two hours after meals and avoiding foods and beverages that worsen symptoms. If needed, your doctor may prescribe medications such as proton-pump inhibitors that decrease or block acid production.

Next Step: *Learn what your child's tummy ache could be telling you. Visit lvhn.org/healthyyou or call 610-402-CARE.*