



ASK DR. DEBBIE...

By Debra A. Hill, MD

HEARTBURN AND DIVING: DO THEY MIX?

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As we enter the holidays we all are eating more at parties and some of us may be experiencing more frequent heartburn and acid reflux. As divers this "little symptom" has particular significance with regard to our diving safety.

Gastroesophageal reflux, GERD, or heartburn all refer to a condition in which acid or food from the stomach washes back up into the esophagus. Many of us have experienced occasional heartburn. The symptoms typically include chest or abdominal burning or pain, often a sour taste in the mouth, or even regurgitation of food.

These symptoms occur after eating and can be exacerbated by drinking alcohol, smoking, consuming specific foods such as those with a high fat content, or foods with caffeine such as coffee or chocolate, or taking certain medications such as aspirin or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory meds (such as Motrin, or Advil).

These all reduce the lower esophageal sphincter pressure and allow the acid to wash up onto the lining of the esophagus. The lower esophageal sphincter is located at the junction between the esophagus and the stomach. It closes after we eat or drink something so as to keep the acid from entering the esophagus. The cells that line the stomach are designed to handle acid, but the cells that line the esophagus are not able to

tolerate the acid. The presence of a hiatal hernia can also exacerbate gastroesophageal reflux. A tight belt or a tight wetsuit, as well as swimming in the head down position can exacerbate an underlying tendency towards GE Reflux.

Treatment can include taking antacids, or other meds that actually decrease the production of the stomach acid such as Acifex, Prilosec, and others. In serious cases of hiatal hernia, surgery is even recommended. *What is important to be aware of for divers, is that **reflux of gastric contents during diving is a serious risk because the stomach acid could be aspirated into the lungs and cause laryngospasm. Spasm of the larynx would mean that no air could enter the lungs.** The result is that the diver would not be able to breath.* This could be fatal. So according to the Dive Alert Network's recommendations, **those with significant Gastroesophageal Reflux should not dive.**

Remember to be healthy and make wise decisions regarding your health and diving.

Happy and Safe Diving!

Yours truly,

Debbie Hill Titus, MD