

THE HEALTH NUGGET



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Is Stomach Acid Good For You? Part 1

Did you know that antacids are one of the best-selling class of drugs ever produced? The industry is said to be twice as large as the entire organic food business! “In the United States alone, we spent more than \$7 billion on them in 1999.”¹ Apparently the business is booming for good reason. Our national epidemic of indigestion, heartburn, and GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) is on the rise. According to a Gallup Poll, 44 percent of the United States population suffers from heartburn at least once a month. And the blame for the pain is placed on “acid indigestion.” As a result, approximately 30 percent of the population takes antacids.

The antacid industry’s wallet would be thrilled to have us think that too much stomach acid is the cause of heartburn. Therefore, neutralizing the digestive juices would be the answer, which is what Prilosec, Tagamet, Zantac, Tums, Rolaids, Alka-Seltzer . . . and other antacids do for us. In their thinking, “To relieve the pain, we need merely reduce the level of acid.”² Are they right?

The rate of heartburn and indigestion increases as we age. This would lead us to think that the need for antacids is as inevitable as the need for hair dye. But stomach acid generally declines as we age. By age 70, we have less than half the level of acidity in the stomach as we did as teenagers. So how would these facts equate heartburn and indigestion to the need for antacids?

Antacids or acid blockers do relieve the symptoms of heartburn pain, which can be so intense it is often mistaken as a potential heart attack. But these

medications do not cure or address the true nature of the problem. Jonathan V. Wright, M.D. and Lane Lenarad, Ph.D. from their research and personal experience in treating patients believe that stomach acid is good for you and is not something to be neutralized. Heartburn is simply acid in the wrong place—the esophagus. And indigestion and GERD they say, can largely be blamed on not enough acid rather than too much. “When we actually measure stomach acid output under careful, research-verified conditions, the overwhelming majority of heartburn sufferers are found to have too little stomach acid production.”³ “The best way to treat ‘acid indigestion’ is not with less stomach acid, but (almost always) with more.”⁴

The stomach was designed to contain extremely acidic fluids, with a normal pH being from 1-3. Rather than the enemy, this highly acidic environment is essential for the proper digestion and absorption of the nutrients we eat. There is growing concern that our dependence on antacids is producing deficiencies of important nutrients. If we wanted to reduce the absorption of iron, calcium, Vitamin B₁₂, and folic acid for example, the best way would be to reduce the acid level in the stomach. The acidity enables these nutrients to be dissolved, extracted and optimally absorbed.

“Sodium bicarbonate reduced iron absorption by 50 percent and calcium bicarbonate [Tums] by 67 percent.”⁵

“We can consume all the calcium-enriched foods, calcium supplements, and Tums we want and still wind up with a calcium deficiency, if we have low

stomach acid due to atrophic gastritis or acid-suppression heartburn ‘therapy.’”⁶

Folic acid is an important B vitamin that not only prevents birth defects, but also prevents heart disease by reducing levels of homocysteine (a risk factor for coronary heart disease and stroke). Low stomach acid levels have been found to interfere with folate (folic acid) absorption. When patients who lack hydrochloric acid are given hydrochloric acid to increase the acidity of the stomach, absorption of folate increases by 54 percent.

In the case of vitamin B₁₂, acid and pepsin are required to detach the vitamin from the protein it enters with. “In one study, administration of Tagamet [an antacid] to twelve duodenal ulcer patients resulted in significant malabsorption [inadequate absorption] of protein-bound vitamin B₁₂.”⁷

The digestion of protein involves breaking down large molecules into protein’s building blocks— amino acids. Essential amino acids are thus released for our use. Hydrochloric acid is necessary for the work of enzymes, such as pepsin, to be activated and do this job well. With insufficient acid levels, protein molecules pass through the system without being fully digested. When these come in contact with an inflamed or damaged intestinal lining, or leaky gut as it is called, these proteins are allowed to pass through. “In sensitive people, ‘foreign’ proteins that manage to cross the intestinal barrier and leak into the general circulation can become the object of a vigorous allergic ‘rejection’ reaction by the immune system.”⁸ It has been hypothesized that this is a potential trigger for the immune system to turn its attack on the body itself, thus developing an autoimmune response. “Among the most important factors that influence whether or not the intestinal barrier springs a leak is none other than the gastric pH.”⁹

Consuming whole plant foods that contain fiber is crucial to our health and recommended

for preventing a variety of ailments. The problem however is that without necessary acidity, fiber can bind with nutrients and actually remove them from the body before they have a chance to get absorbed. Fiber and one of its constituents, phytate, bind to minerals such as calcium, magnesium, iron and zinc and can therefore contribute to mineral deficiencies if the minerals are not released from the phytate. On one hand fiber is good for us. Phytate is being studied for its potential anti-carcinogenic properties. But on the other hand, it causes mineral deficiencies? Are we confused yet? If we neglected to look at the original design of the digestive process we would have reason to throw up our hands in despair. The breaking down of the mineral–phytate compounds and the absorbability of the minerals generally occur only at low pH, a very acidic environment.

Escaping the pain that heart burn, acid indigestion, and dyspepsia in general causes makes sense. Science tells us that man has 3 basic drives: to seek pleasure, avoid pain and expend as little energy as possible. Unfortunately antacids have come in as the wonder drug to answer all three quests. Eat what you want, when you want and avoid the pain with a pop of a pill. Unfortunately, the cost is high. We will continue to look into *Is Stomach Acid Good For You?* next month.

We face a similar situation spiritually. “For thus saith the Lord, . . . thy wound is grievous . . . Thou hast no healing medicines.” The medicines we do have, simply relocate the problem. This is our pathetic situation. The answer to our spiritual heartburn has only one remedy. “I will restore health unto you and I will heal you of your wounds, saith the Lord.” Jeremiah 30:12, 17.

¹ Wright, Jonathan, M.D., *Why Stomach Acid is Good for You*. M. Evans and Company, Inc. 2001, p. 22.

² Ibid. p. 19.

³ Ibid. p. 22.

⁴ Ibid. p. 35.

⁵ Ibid. p. 63.

⁶ Ibid. p. 65.

⁷ Ibid. p. 70.

⁸ Ibid. p. 115.

⁹ Ibid.

