

Shobha John | TNN

Vikas Gupta was a high-flying executive. The 35-year-old's life revolved around traveling, eating out and meeting deadlines. Constant smoking helped him beat stress, he thought, while cutting down on sleep helped him meet punishing commitments. The nagging heartburn was doused with an antacid, while changes in bowel movement were ignored as part of life. Then one day he felt food had started sticking in his throat, forcing him to see a doctor. The diagnosis? Narrowing in the food pipe due to chronic acid reflux.

With increasingly hectic lifestyles, change in food habits and a restless mind, doctors say there's also been a steep rise in the incidence of acidity and with it onset of oesophageal and gastric cancers. And it's not just an Indian phenomenon.

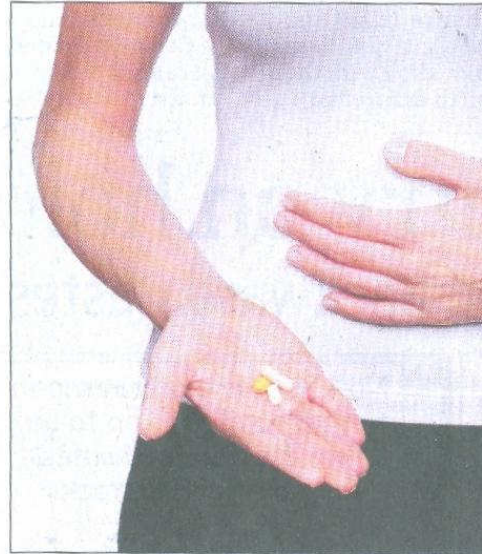
A recent 'New York Times' article said that acidity of the western diet increases the risk of diabetes and heart disease. It quoted a study by Dr Jamie Koufman, a laryngopharyngeal reflux expert, who said that consumption of processed and bottled foods which are "particularly acidic because of federal rules requiring high acidity as a preservative, coincides with a staggering increase in oesophageal cancer."

The reason for this is simple. "Nowadays, most people just gulp

ACID ATTACK

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Skipped that meal again? Modern lifestyles and erratic meal timings are triggering a condition that's increasingly hitting us where it hurts and leaving side-effects that we can't stomach



The good & the bad

What and how to eat

- Eat food low in fats
- Have small but frequent feeds
- Eat cooked vegetables
- Have cooked sprouts, whole grains, ginger, carrots, apples, melons, bananas, broccoli, oatmeal

What to avoid

- High-fat meats
- Dairy products
- Caffeine
- Chocolate
- Carbonated beverages
- Fried food
- Smoking

their food and eat at irregular intervals", says Dr Amit Maydeo, gastroenterologist and endoscopist at Mumbai's Jaslok Hospital and former president of the Society of Gastrointestinal (GI) Endoscopy of India.

While acidity itself may appear innocuous, it can trigger more serious conditions. "With more people eating fast food and drinking impure water, at least eight out of 10 in urban areas have infection with H pylori, a type of bacterium, which is now considered a definite precursor to stomach cancers," says Maydeo.

In fact, this bacterium is the main cause of peptic ulcers and those of the upper small intestine, says Dr Anoop Misra, head of the department of diabetes and metabolic diseases,

Fortis Hospitals, Delhi. "H pylori infection, according to the National Cancer Registry, is a major cause of gastric cancer."

Acidity manifests itself in two ways: burning sensation below the chest and upper stomach. When there is acid reflux (acid from the stomach goes up to the oesophagus, giving a 'heartburn'), changes take place. The lining of the oesophagus gets eroded, leading to ulcerations and difficulty in swallowing. "It then starts resembling the stomach lining, increasing the chances of cancer," says Maydeo. "In the cancer registry of the Tata Memorial Hospital, oesophageal cancer is the commonest form of GI cancer and its incidence has been going up. Five years back, almost 80% of

cancers which occurred in the food pipe were those in the middle or upper part (from skin type lining). But now, almost 50% cancers are seen in the lower part of the food pipe (from the stomach type lining) due to acid injury."

In fact, a study done in 1997 by S M Everett and ATR Axon in 'Gut', an international journal in gastroenterology, found that the most common symptoms of early gastric cancer are acidity and dyspepsia in around 60-90% of these patients. And these are symptoms patients today complain of.

But what exactly is acidity? It's when hydrochloric acid, an important component of digestive juices, goes up into the oesophagus regularly. If the stomach is already inflamed by H pylori bacteria, the acid causes the stomach to burn. And if you are stressed, the stomach could secrete more acids.

It's not uncommon to find people keeping antacids handy all the time. Shalini Gupta, a 40-year-old working woman, says, "I often get a burning sensation after having Delhi's tangy street food and just pop in an antacid. Now, I just can't do without them." But doctors warn that taking antacids more than a few times a week is cause for concern. "Antacids help in immediate neutralizing and even acts as a deterrent but see a doctor if there is constant regurgitation of food," insists Dr Vivek Raj, director, gastroenterology, Max Hospitals, Delhi.

In fact, different parts of the body have different levels of acidity and alkalinity. The ideal pH range for the body is between 6 and 6.8. Values below pH 6.3 are considered acidic. Surprisingly, very acidic foods such as vinegar and lemons actually reduce acidity, while milk, contrary to popular thinking, stimulates acid secretion.

But it would be in the fitness of things to get to the root of the problem. That can be done with the help of high resolution endoscopes and medicines which reduce the acid output. These include proton pump inhibitors and local soothing agents to help the stomach lining.

Next time, though, don't bite off more than you can digest.

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