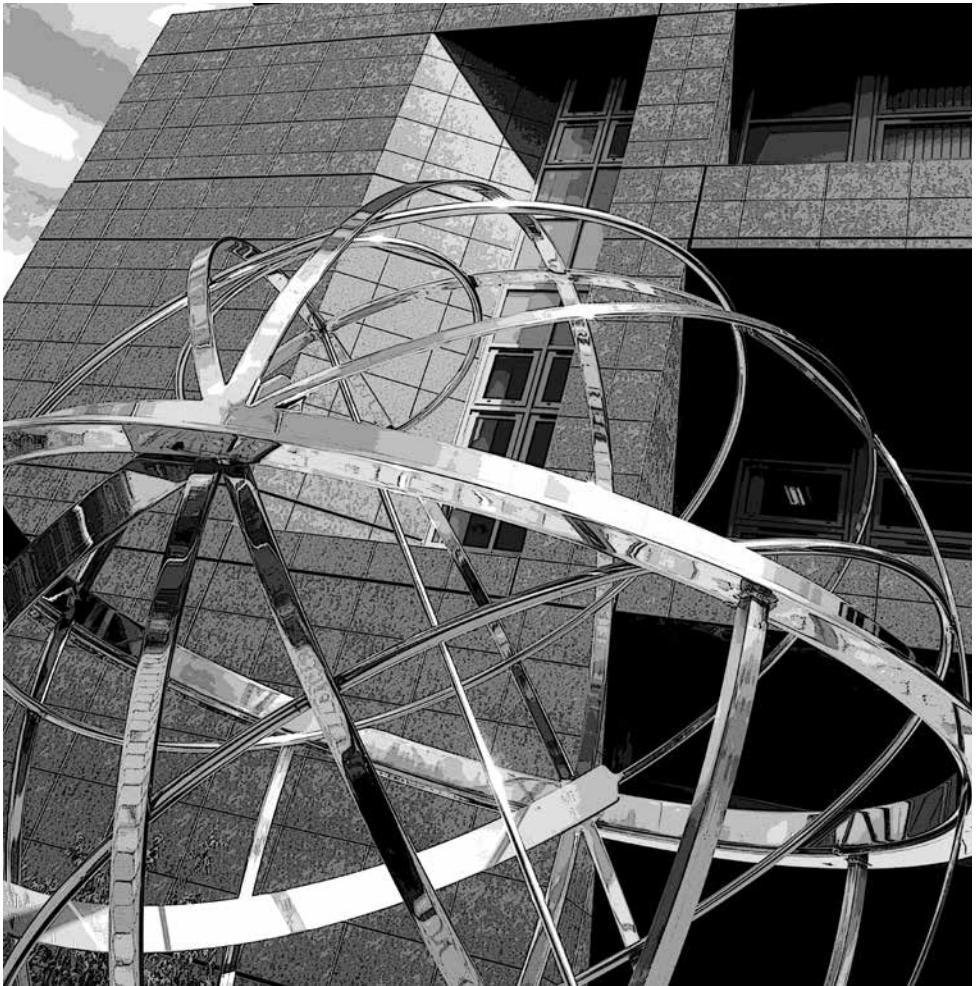


Oxford Centre for Head and Neck Oncology

Gastro-oesophageal Reflux

Information for patients



Gastro-oesophageal reflux is common after head and neck surgery or radiotherapy. Experienced staff have put this information booklet together to answer the most commonly asked questions and give you some ideas on how to manage reflux effectively. We hope it will help you.

What is gastro-oesophageal reflux?

You may find that you experience stomach acid or stomach contents coming up into your throat or oesophagus (the tube that connects your throat to your stomach). This may happen at any time of the day or night, but is most common after meals and when lying down.

What are the symptoms of reflux?

The symptoms can include:

- repeated coughing
- sore throat
- heartburn
- indigestion
- hoarseness or other voice changes
- constant throat clearing
- excessive mucus production
- a bad taste in your mouth
- a sensation of a lump in your throat.

How can reflux be treated?

The aim of any treatment is to keep your stomach acid where it belongs – in your stomach. It is possible to reduce the amount of acid that your stomach produces and to neutralise any excess acid with prescribed medication. It is important to remember that your oesophagus and throat will take time to heal. You should allow at least 4-6 weeks of treatment before expecting full relief of your reflux symptoms.

What else you can do to help yourself

There are several things that you can try:

- Being overweight can make reflux worse. If this applies to you, it is a good idea to lose weight. Please ask the Dietitian for advice.
- You should avoid wearing clothes that are tight around your waist.

- Stop smoking. If you would like support with stopping smoking, talk to your GP, who will have someone at the surgery who is trained to support you. Alternatively, talk to your Nurse Specialist who is a trained advisor.
- Try to avoid slumping, bending or stooping, particularly after eating.
- As reflux is most common at night and when you lie flat, raising the head of your bed by 4-6 inches will allow gravity to keep the acid in your stomach. This can be done by placing wooden blocks, a couple of bricks or telephone directories under the legs at the head of your bed. Using extra pillows to prop up your head will not work, as this will cause your body to curl up. During the night you are also likely to slide off the pillows.
- Try to sleep on your right side or your back.

How does eating certain foods affect reflux?

- Avoid eating large meals as a very full stomach is more likely to start reflux. In particular, avoid a large meal late in the evening and allow time for your stomach to empty before lying down to sleep.
- Aim for small, frequent, well-balanced meals instead.
- Always sit up straight at the table during and after meals.
- Avoid foods that make your symptoms worse.
- Take particular care to limit your intake of coffee (with or without caffeine), tea, fizzy drinks, chocolate, mints, onions, cucumber and alcohol as these stimulate acid production. Spicy and fatty food, citrus fruits or fruit juices (lemon and orange) may make symptoms worse – limit your intake if they are a problem.

Are there any medications that can help?

Antacids are available without a prescription and can be bought over the counter at your local chemist. These help to neutralise excess stomach acid. Remember that antacids can affect the absorption of some other drugs, so it is important to check with your doctor or chemist before taking them.

Medications that form a 'lid' that floats on the surface of the stomach contents, such as Gaviscon, may be helpful. This is also available from your chemist without a prescription.

Medications that reduce the amount of acid that your stomach produces, such as ranitidine, omeprazole, and lansoprazole, may be prescribed for you. You should talk to your doctor about this.

Can any medication make things worse?

Yes. Several types of drugs can increase stomach acid production. Aspirin and aspirin-like medications (known as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) such as ibuprofen or diclofenac, increase acid production, as do a number of other drugs. Check with your doctor to see whether you are on any medications that may increase stomach acid. **DO NOT** stop taking any medication without discussing with your doctor.

Vitamin C is an acidic substance and can cause to reflux when taken in large quantities. We do not recommend taking large doses of Vitamin C supplements (in excess of 1gram/day) as this can have other adverse effects such as increased risk of kidney stones, kidney disease, problems with blood clotting and metabolism.

Once you have a medication for treating excess stomach acid that works well for you, your GP can issue a repeat prescription. It is worth noting that if you have a cancer diagnosis, you are exempt from prescription charges. See your GP or specialist nurse about completing a form to get an exemption card.

How to contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, or need any further information, please contact your GP or telephone:

Head and Neck Cancer Specialist Nurses

Tel: **01865 234 346** (Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 4.00pm)

You will also be given the Specialist Nurses leaflet which contains information on websites and local support groups that you may find helpful.

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**

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