



That bitter taste may be gastric reflux

It happens when stomach acid flows back up towards your throat

BY GLORIA CHAN

RETIRED schoolteacher Karen Tan felt the sensation of something stuck in her throat. Coughing and gagging with all her might, she couldn't get it out.

Finally, after putting up with it for a few weeks, Ms Tan, 61, saw her family doctor who referred her to an otolaryngologist who specialises in conditions of the ear, nose and throat.

She underwent an endoscopy and was diagnosed with gastroesophageal reflux disease (Gerd), also known as gastric or acid reflux.

In Gerd, the stomach acid backs up into the oesophagus, which connects the mouth to the stomach.

Symptoms of Gerd include:

- Burning sensation in the chest (heartburn),
- Bitter or sour taste in the mouth,
- Burping or belching,
- Bloating stomach,
- Hoarseness of voice, and
- Persistent cough.

Gastric reflux can also cause a burning sensation in the chest. FILE PHOTO

Ms Tan had noticed the sour taste in her mouth and that she was feeling hungry all the time. She found herself snacking endlessly and put on some weight.

But she thought nothing of it and was more concerned that there was something growing in her throat.

Dr Reuben Wong, a consultant at the Department of Gastroenterology & Hepatology, National University Hospital, says: "Reflux is very common, and the incidence has been increasing over the years.

"Age is not a big determinant of gastroesophageal reflux. Infants often have belching episodes associated with reflux, but this is physiologic and resolves as they grow up.

"Reflux symptoms can cause significant distress to the patients and affect their quality of life.

"In a small proportion of cases, recurrent chronic reflux can cause damage to the lower oesophagus, sometimes resulting in a pre-cancerous condition known as Barrett's oesophagus.

"It can also sometimes lead to severe dental erosion because of the refluxed acid," says Dr Wong.

According to Dr Wong, acid suppressants are commonly used to treat Gerd.

Surgery is considered if medication fails to work. The surgical procedure involves tightening the valve that controls the junction between the oesophagus and stomach.

Preventive measures

Dr Wong says: "Studies have shown that the incidence of reflux increases in obese individuals, so keeping your Body Mass Index within healthy limits is a simple measure to reduce reflux.

"Certain foods such as spicy food, caffeine and alcohol can bring it on, so cutting back on these may also help.

"Not overeating and eating less before bedtime also go some way towards preventing reflux."

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) physician Tjioe Yan Yin from NTU Chinese Medicine Clinic says that gastric reflux happens when the circulation of the *qi* in the body is disrupted.

This disruption of the *qi* may be caused by improper diet or emotional stress that triggers an upward surge in the stomach, resulting in gastric reflux.

"Eating too much oily or spicy food, not drinking enough water, lack of sleep and stress will affect the flow of *qi*," says Ms Tjioe.

She says that in TCM, gastric reflux is a symptom and not a disease in itself. It can be treated with medication or acupuncture.

The type of medication prescribed will be according to the individual patient's body constitution. If the body constitution is "heaty", the herbs prescribed will clear the "heat" from the body and restore the circulation of *qi*.

In the case of a "cold" body constitution, the medication will work by dissipating the "cold" within the body and restoring

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one's *qi* to normal circulation.

As a preventive measure for gastric reflux, Ms Tjioe recommends regular exercise, which improves the circulation of *qi* and blood in the body.

Be mindful about your diet by avoiding foods that trigger gastric reflux as well as manage your stress level.

Massage your stomach area around the belly button by moving your palm in a clock-wise direction for five minutes every night — it can help to prevent or reduce gastric reflux.