

## The Purple Pill Myth

By Dr. Marlene Merritt

Acid indigestion and heartburn are key indicators of poor digestive health. In today's world, there are numerous pills on the market to help ease the symptoms of these digestive disorders, but are they doing more harm than good?

The ads are all over the TV and splashed across the pages of your favorite magazines – if you have heartburn or acid indigestion, you should be taking an acid-reducing medication, preferably for the rest of your life.

Part of what the ads say is true: It's dangerous to have acid reflux and it is vital to stop it before it does permanent damage. However, turning off the acid in your stomach, whether it's with a purple pill or an antacid, or even taking acid-suppressing Chinese herbs, will lead to a myriad of other problems. It will also not address the root of the problem. Many practitioners simply try to neutralize the acid, which is only a symptom of the root problem.



Doctors today treat many people with acid reflux, sour stomachs, gas/bloating and other digestive symptoms. Yet most patients are suffering not from too much stomach acid, but not enough. Not enough? How can that be?

The function of your stomach acid is to digest protein. When someone has their stomach acid "turned off," they can't digest well. That means when someone eats, say, a piece of chicken, it lands in the stomach, and needs hydrochloric acid to break it down. When there isn't enough hydrochloric acid, the protein sits in the

stomach, it starts to putrefy, creating acid and gases. Now, the person might have some symptoms – a sour stomach, belching, or even acid reflux. But this all happened because they initially didn't have *enough* acid to digest properly.

On the other hand, if you have adequate amounts of stomach acid, it closes the upper sphincter of the stomach when you eat to prevent that good acid from going up into the esophagus. It also opens the lower sphincter to empty your stomach after the food has been digested. But if you don't have enough acid, not only can you not digest the protein; the upper sphincter also doesn't close tightly enough, causing acid reflux and potential damage to the esophagus. Low stomach acid also causes the lower stomach sphincter to stay closed, which leads to the symptom of "fullness after eating." It's not the normal feeling of being full after eating – it's being overly full because the stomach isn't emptying properly.

You need good acidity to absorb minerals like calcium, iron, magnesium, copper and zinc. There are schools of thought that contend not-low-enough stomach pH is the root of many health problems, and considering that magnesium, for example, is used in literally hundreds of enzyme reactions, this is probably not far from the truth. People with poor stomach acid also cannot absorb vitamins C, K, and the B complex vitamins. Think of all the people taking calcium, for example – the majority are unable to absorb them, especially because stomach acid production declines as you age.

Did you know that the pH of your stomach, when it's healthy, is between 1 and 2? There's a reason it's that low – your stomach is the first line of defense for your immune system. You know all those people with sinus infections and post-nasal drip? That infected material drips down into the stomach, where, if the person has good acidity, it kills off any bacteria. Or what about bacteria in foods? Or possibly parasites? Again, good acidity can help kill off anything that might cause food poisoning or infestations of any kind.

And then there are the bacteria of your gut – it's not a mistake that they're called "acidophilus." Those bacteria want to live in an acidic environment. When our gut is not acidic enough, it is nearly a waste to take the probiotics that so many people are ingesting because they don't have the acidic environment required to survive. Not having an acidic-enough environment allows detrimental bacteria like *Candida* to survive and flourish.

Cutting out sugars, yeast, etc., is not enough to treat *Candida* – the digestive tract has to become acidic enough to kill off the detrimental bacteria as well as provide an environment for the correct flora.

The entire digestive process is orchestrated by good stomach acid. If there isn't enough, the gallbladder doesn't get triggered properly to function, and the pancreatic enzymes aren't released for proper digestion.

So, knowing the vital functions of stomach acid, it seems absolutely insane to take antacids or proton-pump inhibitors such as that little purple pill, doesn't it?

How does the stomach acid get turned off? And what can be done about it? The main reason stomach acid gets turned off is from stress caused by high carb intake (high sugar levels are enormously stressful for the body), mental stress, physical stresses like excessive exercise, or physical stresses such as inflammation, infections, anemia or food intolerances. People who have had gastric bypass surgeries often have the acid-producing part of their stomach removed.

I would estimate that a minimum of 90 percent of the patients I see have reduced stomach acid. These are people with blood sugar issues (that's nearly everyone), with symptoms of gas (especially gas with smell), bloating, "fullness," or with symptoms of acidity, sour stomach or acid reflux. I see people with constipation, or a loss of appetite for meat – this is a classic sign of low stomach acid. I see people who don't eat meat because it "doesn't digest well." Older people lose some of their ability to produce stomach acid, often just when they need it most – to digest protein (to maintain muscle mass) and for vitamins and minerals.

Most people simply need supplementation of digestible betaine hydrochloride (HCl), for three to six months to restore proper acidity to the stomach and eliminate the symptoms they're having.

Mucilaginous vegetables like okra are especially effective for that. The stomach lining heals quite quickly, so after 10 days of eating okra or taking okra pills, you can add in the betaine hydrochloride with each meal. Make sure that it's taken with or right after a meal.

Apple cider vinegar is a popular home remedy for low stomach acid, but it's quite weak. It will help a little, but you might also consider supplementation, because if you are continuing to stress your body in whatever way that you do, the apple cider vinegar might not be enough, and considering how much we need good acid, it might be worthwhile to supplement.

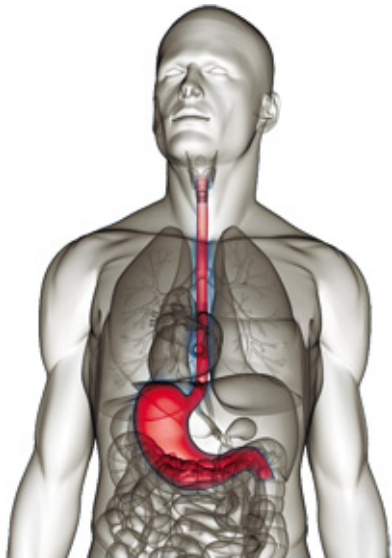
You might also want to limit how much water you consume at a meal. We get served these huge glasses of water and are told to drink large amounts of water during the day, but water will dilute the action of stomach acid, reducing its effectiveness. Some water is OK, but it's best to drink *between* meals and avoid ice water.

It's not just a matter of fixing the problem once and thinking you're done. Pay attention to symptoms, and ask your doctor about betaine hydrochloride if you start having problems. Anytime you have a large meal, or when you travel, or in periods of high stress, you take it just as a precaution.

You will be amazed at how quickly those acid reflux, sour stomach, and gas problems will be resolved without having to take a lifetime of purple pills when you incorporate these simple, natural strategies. Ask your doctor for more information regarding digestive health.

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### **What Is Acid Indigestion?**



Acid indigestion is defined by medical doctors as excessive secretion of hydrochloric acid by the stomach cells. Sometimes used interchangeably with heartburn. Many of the problems associated with stomach acid are also known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), peptic esophagitis; reflux esophagitis; heartburn or dyspepsia.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is a condition in which the stomach contents (food or liquid) leak backwards from the stomach into the esophagus (the tube from the mouth to the stomach). This action can irritate the esophagus, causing heartburn and other symptoms.

When you eat, food passes from the throat to the stomach through the esophagus (also called the food pipe or swallowing tube). Once food is in the stomach, a ring of muscle fibers prevents food from moving backward into the esophagus. These muscle fibers are called the lower esophageal sphincter, or LES.

If this sphincter muscle doesn't close well, food, liquid, and stomach acid can leak back into the esophagus. This is called reflux or gastroesophageal reflux. This reflux may cause symptoms, or can even damage the esophagus.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor.

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