Finding heartburn relief

Q: I have been taking a medicine to treat heartburn. I have heard that might not be a great idea anymore and that there can be some long-term consequences for taking them. What can I do to naturally reduce or treat my heartburn? — L.J.C., Winterville

A: I asked Kathryn Clary, a second-year Brody Medical student, to tell you about some lifestyle behaviors that can make your heartburn better or worse. Here is what she wants you to know.

Heartburn is a common problem for many of us. We couldn't find any statistics for North Carolina, but about 2 in 10 adults in the U.S. experience it. It is a painful, burning feeling in the throat or chest.

It's good to have some background on digestion, to better understand why heartburn happens in the first place. Heartburn is the most common symptom of acid reflux, which is when stomach acid gets pushed into the esophagus. The esophagus is where food and drink go once swallowed — it is the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach. Food is supposed to move in one direction: from the mouth to the esophagus and then to the stomach.

In order to keep stomach contents from moving backward, we have a ring-shaped muscle in between the end of the esophagus and the stomach that stays tightly clenched, keeping stomach contents where they belong. Sometimes, this muscle doesn't close all the way, and stomach acid goes into your esophagus, causing heartburn. Other common symptoms of reflux include difficulty swallowing, an acidic taste at the back of the mouth, and cough.

See KOLASA, C2
KATHY KOLASA

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Benefits of dark chocolate

Q: My girlfriend is a health nut, but I really want to give her some chocolate for Valentine's. Is it OK? MK, Greenville

A: Kathryn Clary, a Brody medical student, suggests that dark chocolate really can prevent a broken heart with its benefits to the cardiovascular system. Here is what she wants you to know for Valentine's and every day.

On Valentine's Day, we celebrate love — love for a partner, love for yourself, and what better way to celebrate love than with a delicious box of chocolates? If you are a chocolate lover, you will be delighted over this scrumptious finding: research suggests that dark chocolate may be good for your love muscle — the heart.

The cocoa in dark chocolate naturally contains anti-oxidants, protecting your heart and blood vessels from damage and disease.

Although cocoa has its health benefits, not all chocolate is healthy. Some milk chocolate is processed in a way that removes the heart-healthy ingredients in the cocoa. So, it is dark chocolate you want to share.

Before you devour that candy bar, remember that chocolate candy often contains added sugars and saturated fats — not heart healthy. Using the Nutrition Facts label on the package can help you choose your chocolate. First, start with the serving size to know how many servings are in the package. Look at the saturated fat that the American Heart Association (AHA) recommends limiting to 13 grams per day. Look at the added sugars (under "Total Carbohydrate"). AHA recommends limiting added sugar to 25 grams per day for women and 36 grams for men. Consider the other foods you plan on eating.

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