- Acidity



*Health*

Heartburn can be a common problem for midlife women – especially when hearty winter comfort food beckons. Here's how to ease the discomfort.

# Burn it down

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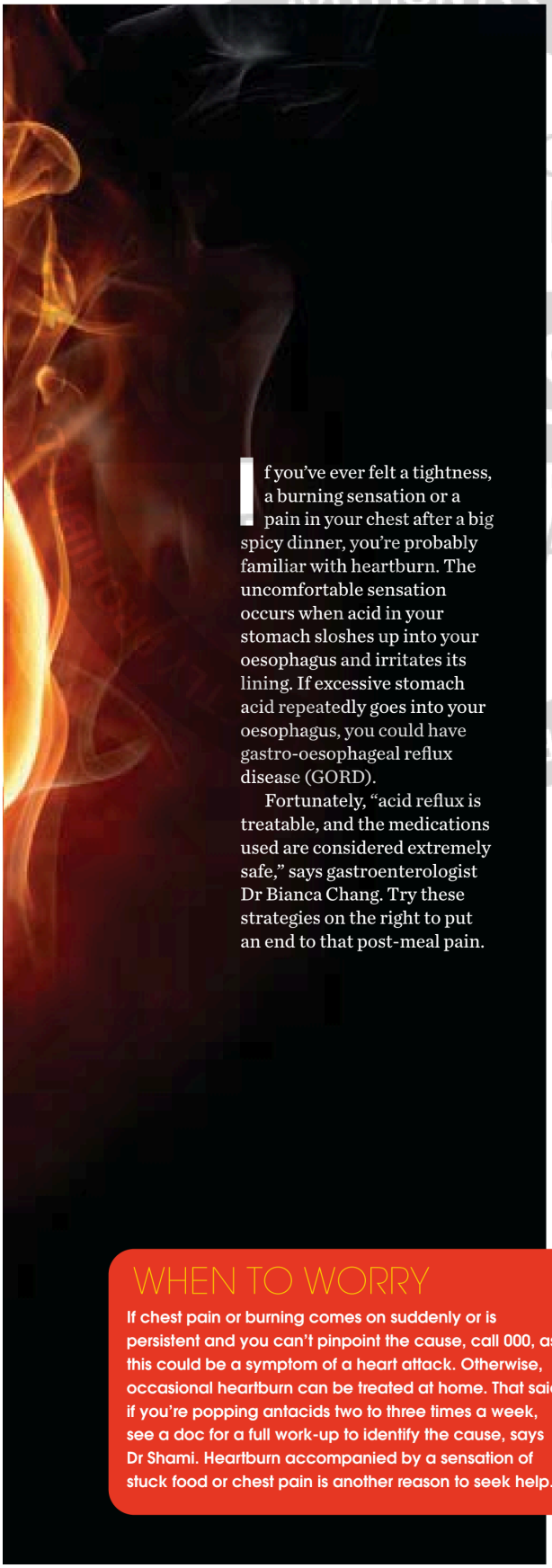

If you've ever felt a tightness, a burning sensation or a pain in your chest after a big spicy dinner, you're probably familiar with heartburn. The uncomfortable sensation occurs when acid in your stomach sloshes up into your oesophagus and irritates its lining. If excessive stomach acid repeatedly goes into your oesophagus, you could have gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD).

Fortunately, "acid reflux is treatable, and the medications used are considered extremely safe," says gastroenterologist Dr Bianca Chang. Try these strategies on the right to put an end to that post-meal pain.

## WHEN TO WORRY

If chest pain or burning comes on suddenly or is persistent and you can't pinpoint the cause, call 000, as this could be a symptom of a heart attack. Otherwise, occasional heartburn can be treated at home. That said, if you're popping antacids two to three times a week, see a doc for a full work-up to identify the cause, says Dr Shami. Heartburn accompanied by a sensation of stuck food or chest pain is another reason to seek help.

## LIFESTYLE TWEAKS

These simple behavioural changes can be a good place to start.

▶ **Limit alcohol and quit smoking.** Both of these habits may trigger heartburn by relaxing the lower oesophageal sphincter, letting more acid come up.

▶ **Avoid trigger foods.** Common culprits include greasy or spicy food, caffeine, carbonated drinks, tomato sauce and citrus juices, says gastroenterologist Dr Joseph G. Shami. Weight gain may also increase the risk of GORD and worsen symptoms.

▶ **Try relaxation techniques.** Gastrointestinal symptoms can impact your emotional health, and unfortunately stress can make acid reflux worse. Give stress-relief techniques such as yoga and walking a shot to see which ones work best for you.

▶ **Avoid eating before bed.** Dr Shami recommends staying upright for at least two hours after eating, especially if you've had a big meal.

▶ **Elevate the head of your bed.** If you're not able to do this, then "a wedge pillow can help," says Dr Chang.

## MEDICATIONS

Over-the-counter meds that may do the job include…

▶ **Antacids** These help reduce the acid in your stomach. Popular ones include Gaviscon and Mylanta, and they're best used one hour after eating because they work quickly to relieve short-term symptoms.

▶ **H2 blockers** These meds "bind to the histamine-2 receptor in the stomach and subsequently decrease both fasting and meal-stimulated acid secretion," explains Dr Chang. Famotidine (for example, Pepcid) is available without prescription from pharmacies, while nizatidine (Axid is a brand name) may require a prescription.

▶ **Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs)** These block acid that is secreted through a different pathway. Available by prescription or over the counter as esomeprazole (Nexium), omeprazole (Losec), pantoprazole (Somac), lansoprazole (Zoton) or rabeprazole (Pariet), they can take a few days to kick in, so they're recommended for chronic GORD. "There are potential adverse effects," says Dr Chang. "Those requiring long-term PPIs should discuss with their doctor what type of monitoring may be needed."

## HOME REMEDIES

Not every hack is useful, but a few DIY solutions might be: Chewing a piece of **non-peppermint sugar-free gum** after eating can help dilute any acid that finds its way back up. Eating a **banana** may aid in relieving heartburn as well – research shows that the fibre-rich fruit can neutralise stomach acid. Taking **liquorice root extract** or occasionally drinking a glass of water with 1 tsp of **baking soda** mixed in could work, too, but talk to your GP before trying either. P