

### 3.13 Digestive health - Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease

Oliver has heartburn and a funny sensation in his throat.

Oliver: I'm mowing my way through the Rennies doc. You've gotta give me something to sort it out. Why is this happening?

Provide: Heartburn is where the acid contents of the stomach, and food, wash up and irritate the gullet. It can also irritate the throat and cause an irritating cough.

It's more common in people who are overweight or smoke. It is made worse by caffeine, alcohol, mints, chocolate, spicy and other foods. You should try to figure out what makes your heartburn worse and avoid it.

Elicit: What do you think any of those things might be bringing *your* heartburn on?

Oliver: Well, it was a good Christmas. Maybe the booze and gaining weight could be to blame. What should I do about it?

Provide: I think you've answered your own question. Losing weight and cutting back are so important in the long term.

Elicit: Let us know if you need any help with that.

Oliver: It's alright doc, I know what I need to do.

Provide: If your heartburn is worse at night; perhaps you should avoid eating for a couple of hours before bedtime. But an even better thing to do is to raise the head of the bed a little. 15cm should do it. Perhaps on some bricks. It may take a few weeks before you notice the benefit.

Oliver: Yeah, I've started using extra pillows.

Provide: Well. That is unlikely to be nearly so good as raising the whole bed head.

Elicit: Stress can make heartburn worse - are you stressed in any way at the moment?

Oliver: No more than usual doctor. I really need a quick fix for this though. What should I take as well as the Rennies?

Provide: Antacids, which you can buy from the chemist, are useful, but I can prescribe a tablet to reduce the amount of acid produced in the stomach. That's normally very effective. They are generally safe in the short term. I recommend you take them for a month and then wean off them. If your symptoms return I need to talk to you again.

Elicit: What do you think?

Oliver: Yeah. But what if I can't get the weight off and I end up needing to use these tablets in the long term?

Provide: Well they are pretty safe, but there is a small increase in the risk of you getting pneumonia, gut infections, thin bones and cramps. Best to wean off them when you can, and follow my "heartburn the organic way" recommendations.

Elicit: Perhaps you can remember the things that make heartburn more likely?

Oliver: Yeah. Drinking, smoking and alcohol. I'll definitely raise my bed though!

Elicit: Perhaps I could tell you about the things that might suggest that something more serious is going on?

Oliver: Of course.

Provide: Your tummy is not tender today, so I don't think your symptoms are worrying, but we need to see you if you have persistent tummy pain. Also if you lose weight unexpectedly, get any swallowing problems, vomit blood or pass sticky black stools, I need to see you urgently.

(There is no value in testing for H pylori in heartburn.)