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Natural history of heartburn

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A research team from Iceland studied the natural history and prevalence of heartburn at a 10-year interval, and the effect of heartburn on various symptoms and activities. The results showed that heartburn is a common and chronic condition. Subjects with a body mass index below or higher than normal weight are more likely to experience heartburn. Heartburn has a great impact on daily activities, sleep and quality of life.

Heartburn is a signature symptom of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which is a cluster of symptoms and signs associated with regurgitation of stomach acid up to the pharynx and mouth. Patient-based studies of GERD have shown high prevalence and chronicity, particularly in Western societies. GERD is associated with significant health-care utilization and diminished quality of life. Heartburn, coupled with acid regurgitation and painful swallowing are considered to be highly specific for GERD. Very few epidemiological studies have been performed with regard to heartburn, and only one has been population-based. The natural history of GERD or heartburn has received little attention. The pathophysiology of GERD and heartburn is basically unknown.

A research article to be published on February 7, 2011 in the World Journal of Gastroenterology addresses this question. The authors evaluated the natural history of heartburn in the Icelandic population prospectively over a 10-year period, as well as to evaluate different factors which are affected by heartburn both physically and sociodemographically.

The study showed heartburn is a common condition in the population of Iceland. The prevalence is slightly higher than reported elsewhere. Heartburn is a chronic condition, affecting every fifth person every week. Heartburn subjects with a body mass index lower or higher than normal weight were more likely to experience heartburn than subjects of normal weight. Heartburn did not seem to result in less food and beverage consumption, but one out of five heartburn subjects did avoid a specific food or alcohol because of the heartburn. Heartburn had a great impact on daily activities and quality of life. Half of the heartburn subjects experienced sleep disturbances because of this condition.

This study creates a database for future studies and hopefully stimulates studies in other countries. Secular prevalence trends and international comparison can contribute towards understanding of the pathophysiology of the disease.

More information: Olafsdottir LB, Gudjonsson H, Jonsdottir HH, Thjodleifsson B. Natural history of heartburn: A 10-year population-based study. World J Gastroenterol 2011; 17(5): 639-645 www.wjgnet.com/1007-9327/full/v17/i5/639.htm

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