

Americans Are Eating Dinner Later, Spawning Acid Reflux Epidemic

By Lynn Allison

Years ago, dinner time for most Americans was 5 to 5:30 p.m. Today, it is 6 to 7 p.m. and, it's not uncommon for many of us who work late to eat our biggest meal of the day at 8:30 p.m. or even later.

The late-night dining trend has spawned a national epidemic of acid reflux, says a top expert on the condition.

"Acid reflux now affects some 40 percent of Americans," says Jamie Koufman, M.D., author of *The Chronic Cough Enigma*.

Acid reflux is not just a matter of a little discomfort from heartburn. It can be deadly, causing esophageal cancer, which has increased by 500 percent in the U.S. since 1970, Dr. Koufman told Health Radar.

The single greatest risk factor for acid reflux is night eating, says Dr. Koufman, a pioneering laryngologist and director of the Voice Institute of New York.

One patient, a restaurateur, came to see Dr. Koufman with symptoms of postnasal drip, sinus disease, heartburn, and chronic cough.

The patient reported that it was his routine to leave his restaurant at 11 p.m.

After arriving home he would make a large dinner for himself, eat it quickly, and then go to bed afterward.

"There was no medical treatment for this patient," Dr. Koufman recalls.

"I could offer no pills or surgery to fix his condition. His reflux was a lifestyle problem. I told him he had to eat dinner before 7 p.m. and not eat after work at all. Within six weeks, his reflux was gone."

Even though Europeans have a tendency to eat late dinners, they have about half the incidence of reflux as Americans.

What's their anti-heartburn secret?

They generally go to bed later than Americans, allowing more digestion time between meal time and bedtime.

Europeans also tend to walk or at least stand after dinner, not recline in front of a television until it is time to sleep.

"After eating it's important to stay upright because gravity helps keep the contents in the stomach. Reflux is the result of acid spilling out of the stomach, and lying down with a full stomach makes reflux much more likely to occur," says Dr. Koufman.

Europeans also tend to eat less for dinner than Americans, who make the evening meal the largest meal of the day. And Europeans generally have much smaller dessert portions.

"To stop reflux disease we have to stop eating at least three hours before bedtime," Dr. Koufman says. "Even my patients who eat healthfully, find that they need to change the timing of their meals to get relief?"

It's not only the timing and amount of food that is important. What you eat or drink also is a factor.

Soft drinks, alcohol, and high-sugar, high-fat, processed foods are the most likely to cause reflux. Eaten shortly before bedtime they are a prescription for heartburn, says Dr. Koufman.

If you are hungry and absolutely must have something to eat right before bedtime, Dr. Koufman recommends two foods that are less likely to cause reflux: oatmeal or a banana.

Here are six foods most likely to bring on acid reflux.

- ▶ **Alcohol:** A nightcap is the "kiss of death" for reflux sufferers. Alcohol relaxes the esophageal valve, making it easier for stomach acid to move upward.
- ▶ **Soda:** Soft drinks and fruit juices are highly acidified, which can lead to reflux.
- ▶ **Chocolate:** It's a notorious reflux trigger.
- ▶ **Ice Cream:** Ice cream is a popular late-night treat, but the high-fat content often leads to heartburn.
- ▶ **Nuts:** Cashews, macadamia nuts, peanuts, and walnuts are common reflux trigger foods.
- ▶ **Cheese:** Cheese brings on heartburn for many sufferers.