

COMMON COMPLAINT: HEARTBURN GORD (GASTRO-OESOPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE)

Acid reflux, the leading symptom of reflux oesophagitis, is the commonest disorder of the upper digestive tract in the western population. 40% of them have acid reflux once a month, a quarter of them daily.

Other symptoms:

- cramp-like retrosternal pain,
- hoarseness,
- globus sensation,
- swallowing difficulty,
- increased saliva production,
- ulcers on the vocal cords,
- chronic cough, culminating in asthma attacks.

Apart from the suffering of the patients, the enormous cost of drugs for conservative long-term treatment and the increased risk of malignancy (oesophageal carcinoma), these all mean that reflux oesophagitis also represents a significant factor in health economics.

Pathogenesis:

Impaired oesophageal clearance and motility combined with distal sphincter incompetence allows gastric juice, which is usually acid, to flow back into the oesophagus; this damages the mucous membrane which can lead to ulceration, narrowing of the oesophagus and eventually malignant degeneration.

A hiatus hernia, which is often congenital, is usually a contributory factor for lower oesophageal sphincter incompetence. Circumstances which can favour its development include:

- body shape (obesity),
- connective tissues weakening with increasing age,
- pregnancy,
- high-energy sports involving increased intraabdominal pressure,
- acid stimulants such as: sugar, fats, caffeine and alcohol.