

## THE ANXIOUS GERD DIET

By Yolande House

Four years ago, your second flare-up of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease—what you awkwardly call “bad stomach acid” until you find the term “flare-up,” which is more apt. Months of trial and error led to a strict regimen you partially still follow:

### **AVOID THESE FOODS (if in doubt, test\* to confirm intolerance):**

#### DAIRY

You’ve abstained from this for the last five years after two naturopathic doctors suggested cow’s milk may be the cause of your congested sinuses and they were right. Score!

*Alternatives:* Nut milks, ice creams, and cheeses; buffalo milk kefir; or goat milk.

#### SODAS

Another score: after a couple of years of sugar-free diets to address other health issues, soda pop is a rare treat you’re happy to skip. The bubbles in the liquid mimic and cause acid, so even sugar-free varieties are out.

*Alternatives:* Kombucha (the sourer the better!) or homemade flavoured waters—just add fruit rinds or mint leaves to a bottle of chilled water for a day, and voila!

#### TOMATOES

This restriction you remember well from your first GERD flare a decade ago, when you learned tomatoes were among the most acidic foods. For years you’ll miss the sweet tang of ketchup and switch to mayo instead.

*Alternatives:* Once you’ve healed a fair amount, Ajvar, a Balkan paste made from red peppers and eggplant, or your partner’s labour-intensive, homemade “nomato” sauce.

#### CITRUS LIKE LEMON AND LIME

Limes were once one of your favourite foods, but now you scan ingredient lists and inquire at restaurants to discover—as with tomatoes—that citrus juices are frequently used as cheap flavour enhancers.

*Alternatives:* Apple cider vinegar, tamarind paste, lime leaves, passion fruit, and citric acid.

### RED MEAT AND ALCOHOL

Not a big loss. You love vegetarian food, and you haven't drunk much since your last job.

*Alternatives:* Fit in at social events by ordering berry-flavoured kombucha in a wine glass.

### OILY OR FRIED FOODS

The heavy oil is hard for your stomach to digest, similar to red meat.

*Alternatives:* None. Early in your recovery, even the oily fried egg at your local restaurant wrings out your insides.

### CHOCOLATE

You pine for your formerly favourite food for a year-and-a-half until you can tolerate its earthy bittersweet calm again.

*Alternatives:* None that you can find. Later you rediscover carob, which you also enjoy, but its fruity chalkiness doesn't quite satisfy.

### CAFFEINE

This one you'll struggle with. How do people stay awake? Over the months as you nurse yourself back to equilibrium in rented rooms living off savings, you'll compensate with twenty-minute naps. When you run out of money and go back to work full-time, you reluctantly settle on (ab)using sugar as a quick energy substitute.

*Alternatives:* Once you can tolerate them again: hot chocolate, dandelion coffee, and green tea. Backtrack on the green tea when the pandemic hits and your digestive system regresses due to what one person on social media called experiencing a real-life crossover between a staycation and a SAW movie.

### BEANS

Though not acidic, too many of these fiber-heavy foods trigger your irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which your doctor diagnosed you with at the same time as your second GERD flare. Take electrolytes in things like coconut water or hydrator mixes to help with hydration to avoid your bowels' painful griping with nothing coming out.

*Alternatives:* Get your vegetarian protein from sources like tofu.

### HOT SPICE

You used to dislike spicy food until you visited friends in Texas and fell in love with mouth-singeing TexMex. Your tongue still adores the flavour but your gut violently disagrees.

*Alternatives:* Flavour foods with digestive herbs like cinnamon, ginger, and turmeric.

**TIMING OF MEALS:** Consume a healthy snack every two hours and split mealtimes into smaller portions 4-5 times per day. Both overeating and undereating can trigger stomach acid. It is a fine balancing act, one which you will fumble like a toddler trying to walk. The day you rush all over the city, skipping lunch in search of a computer repair shop, leaves your empty tummy heaving. The snacks you kept downing weren't enough. Mealtimes require more than the empty promise of a foil-wrapped bar, protein-filled or not.

**OTHER INSTRUCTIONS:** Panic when you're exhausted but can't lay down for two hours after eating and you eat five small meals a day. The doctor said three hours would be safer, or even four. You perfect sitting-up naps, your upper torso propped up by pillows or arms hugging a bean bag chair.

*\*Regularly "test" these guidelines at various restaurants, which may or may not honour your dietary requests. "Well, I guess there was lemon in that," you can say with a chuckle as your innards churn. "Still intolerant!"*

This diet can be very difficult to maintain. Thankfully, your body will throw a ginormous pain fest every time you push things too far, like that handful of cookies you thought you could get away with since technically it doesn't count as any of the above. Nope! You'll stick to one or two cookies per sitting for the foreseeable future. When people congratulate you on your weight loss, utter a short laugh. Like you would do this on purpose.

**IN CASE OF PANIC ATTACK:** Dig into your two-year-old stash of pock-marked Ativan you should have stored in a water-tight container.

**WHAT TO INGEST TO AID DIGESTION (if in doubt, test to confirm tolerance):**

PROBIOTICS

Your naturopathic doctor recommends taking six capsules that include specific bacteria strains per day, amounting to about \$100 per month, or 1/10<sup>th</sup> of your monthly wage once you go back to full-time work. Take two capsules one hour after each meal. Consume at least one per day for the rest of your life, preferably before bedtime when your stomach often opts to eat itself.

FERMENTED FOODS

Kefir, kimchi, kombucha, sauerkraut and other pre-digested foods are easy on your system and have natural probiotics and enzymes to help break down your meals.

GENTLE FIBRE

Emphasis on gentle. Remember the pure psyllium you used as a cheap alternative that felt like glass shards were shredding your bowels, complete with bloody stool. Find a gentler blend and start small, even a sprinkle. Sip a small amount of prune juice. Something has to get your insides moving.

TEAS

Chamomile and ginger teas soothe nausea and ease digestion. Avoid mint tea until your tummy heals up a bit since it can be a little too stimulating. Once you can tolerate it, suck it back like amber pints on a first date.

TURMERIC

Fresh or in capsule form, this herb helps bring down inflammation. Sprinkle the powder in your daily smoothie! Try Golden Milk for a yummy latte alternative.

DIGESTIVE ENZYMES OR PAPAYA/PINEAPPLE

Eating these fruits at the end of a large meal becomes a habit for you and can help ward off the need for over-the-counter medications and antacid formulations that only half work.

PEPTO BISMOL

Two months into your illness, your naturopathic doctor finally suggests this (she says) mostly natural alternative to digestion-damaging antacids.

NON-DAIRY ICE CREAMS & YOGURT

These soothe your flaming intestines like a firehose trained on flickering timber.

## **HELPFUL PRACTICES & REMINDERS**

BEDTIME ROUTINE (Duration 1.5 hours):

- Yoga on your dollar-store mat (*20 mins*)
- Self-reiki, limbs arranged carefully on a beanbag (*15 mins*)
- Meditation #1 while doing Trauma Releasing Exercises, your legs kicking into the air while your muscles vibrate away decades of tension (*20-40 mins*)
- Meditation #2 while you're supine in bed wishing for sleep (*15 mins*)

NOTE: If your symptoms improve but do not go away, congratulations! You may need to remain on a version of this diet for the rest of your life.

## **CONTINUE TO DO THE FOLLOWING:**

- Refrain from laying down for one hour after eating.
- Ingest two bottles of Pepto Bismol per week on average. You'll need it.
- Avoid lemon, lime, tomatoes, oranges, and caffeine. Limit hot spice and alcohol. If no "tests" have happened lately, it is allowable to try a little of these one day to confirm whether your insides still distend like a helium balloon.

**GOOD LUCK AND GOOD HEALING!**