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Media Contact: Anne Brownsey
(630) 570-5635
abrownsey@asge.org

American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy
1520 Kensington Road, Suite 202
Oak Brook, IL 60523

P (630) 573-0600
F (630) 573-0691
www.asge.org
www.screen4coloncancer.org

HOLIDAY EATING AND GERD: THE FACTS ABOUT SYMPTOMS AND WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

OAK BROOK, Ill., Nov. 14, 2011 – The holiday season is fast approaching and for approximately 30 million Americans with gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, celebrations can be less than festive when holiday eating becomes uncomfortable. National GERD Awareness Week is November 20-26, and the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy urges individuals who suffer from GERD to seek medical diagnosis and treatment to make their holidays and every day comfortable and symptom-free.

What is GERD?

Gastroesophageal reflux occurs when contents in the stomach flow back into the esophagus. This happens when the valve between the stomach and the esophagus, known as the lower esophageal sphincter, opens inappropriately.

What causes GERD?

GERD is caused when there is an imbalance between the normal defense mechanisms of the esophagus and offensive factors such as acid and other digestive juices and enzymes in the stomach. Often, the barrier between the stomach and the esophagus is impaired by weakening of the muscle (lower esophageal sphincter) or the presence of a hiatal hernia, where part of the stomach is displaced into the chest. Hiatal hernias, however, are common and not all people with a hiatal hernia have reflux. A major contributor to reflux is obesity whereby increased pressure in the abdomen overcomes the barrier between the stomach and the esophagus. Obesity, pregnancy, smoking, excess alcohol use and consumption of a variety of foods such as coffee, citrus drinks, tomato-based products, chocolate, peppermint and fatty foods may also contribute to reflux symptoms.

What are the symptoms of GERD?

Common symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux disease are heartburn and/or acid regurgitation. Heartburn is a burning sensation felt behind the breast bone that occurs when stomach contents irritate the normal lining of the esophagus. Acid regurgitation is the sensation of stomach fluid coming up through the chest which may reach the mouth. Less common symptoms that may also be associated with gastroesophageal reflux include unexplained chest pain, wheezing, sore throat and cough, among others.

If you can answer "yes" to two or more of the following questions, you may have GERD.

1. Do you frequently have one or more of the following?
 - An uncomfortable feeling behind the breast bone that seems to be moving upward from the stomach?
 - A burning sensation in the back of your throat?

- A bitter acid taste in your mouth?
- 2. Do you often experience these problems after meals?
- 3. Do you experience heartburn or acid indigestion two or more times per week?
- 4. Do you find that antacids only provide temporary relief from your symptoms?
- 5. Are you taking prescription medication to treat heartburn but still having symptoms?

Can it be prevented or treated?

If you suspect you or a loved one may have GERD, the first step is to consult your healthcare provider or a gastrointestinal specialist to obtain an accurate diagnosis. A gastroenterologist is a specialist physician who diagnoses and treats diseases of the digestive tract, such as GERD. Work in partnership with your physician to initiate the best available treatment plan.

Treatment options can include lifestyle modifications, medication, surgery, or a combination of methods. Over-the-counter medications may provide only temporary symptom relief and may not prevent recurrence of symptoms or allow an injured esophagus to heal. They should not be taken regularly as a substitute for prescription medicines without consultation with a physician, as they may hide a more serious condition. If medications are needed regularly for more than two weeks, consult a physician for a diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

Enjoy Your Holidays and Every Day

Seek diagnosis and treatment if symptoms occur on a regular basis. Your gastroenterologist can help you enjoy your holidays and every day by defining your discomfort and providing treatment designed for you. For more information on GERD and to find a gastroenterologist in your area who can diagnose and treat you or a loved one, visit www.asge.org.

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About the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

Since its founding in 1941, the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE) has been dedicated to advancing patient care and digestive health by promoting excellence in gastrointestinal endoscopy. ASGE, with nearly 12,000 members worldwide, promotes the highest standards for endoscopic training and practice, fosters endoscopic research, recognizes distinguished contributions to endoscopy, and is the foremost resource for endoscopic education. Visit www.asge.org and www.screen4coloncancer.org for more information and to find a qualified doctor in your area.

About Endoscopy

Endoscopy is performed by specially-trained physicians called endoscopists using the most current technology to diagnose and treat diseases of the gastrointestinal tract. Using flexible, thin tubes called endoscopes, endoscopists are able to access the human digestive tract without incisions via natural orifices. Endoscopes are designed with high-intensity lighting and fitted with precision devices that allow viewing and treatment of the gastrointestinal system.