Antacids

Antacids neutralise the acid made by your stomach. They are commonly used in conditions where it is helpful to neutralise the acid made in the stomach. For example, for acid reflux which causes heartburn. Most people who take antacids do not develop any side-effects.

What are antacids?

Antacids are a group (class) of medicines which help to neutralise the acid content of your stomach. Antacids include aluminium hydroxide, magnesium carbonate and magnesium trisilicate. These come in various brand names and are available as tablets and liquids.

Some antacids are combined with another medicine called simeticone which helps to reduce wind (flatulence).

Another group of medicines called alginates are found in some brands of antacid medication. Alginates are added to help protect the lining of the gullet (oesophagus) from stomach acid. Alginates include sodium alginate and alginic acid. They are present in antacid medications with various brand names.

What conditions are antacids used to treat?

Antacids may be used:

- To reduce the symptoms of acid reflux which may cause heartburn or inflammation of the gullet (oesophagitis). These conditions are sometimes called gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD).
- To relieve some of the symptoms caused by ulcers in the stomach and part of the gut called the duodenum.
- In other conditions where it is helpful to neutralise stomach acid. For example, for occasional bouts of indigestion (dyspepsia).

Before the discovery of other more modern medicines, antacids were commonly used for the above conditions. They were also used to help heal ulcers in the stomach and duodenum.

Modern medicines called proton pump inhibitors and H2-receptor antagonists (commonly called H2 blockers) are now more widely used for these conditions. They are much more effective than antacids. Unlike antacids, which simply neutralise the acid for a short period, these modern medicines work by reducing the amount of acid made by the stomach.

However, antacids still have a place. They are most commonly used to provide quick relief of symptoms caused by stomach acid. In particular, in people who have occasional bouts of mild dyspepsia or heartburn.

How do antacid tablets work?
Your stomach normally produces acid to help with the digestion of food and to kill germs (bacteria). This acid is corrosive so your body produces a natural mucus barrier which protects the lining of the stomach from being worn away (eroded).

In some people this barrier may have broken down allowing the acid to damage the stomach, causing an ulcer. In others there may be a problem with the muscular band at the top of the stomach (the sphincter) that keeps the stomach tightly closed. This may allow the acid to escape and irritate the gullet (oesophagus). This is called acid reflux, which can cause heartburn and/or inflammation of the gullet (oesophagitis).

Antacids work by counteracting (neutralising) the acid in your stomach. They do this because the chemicals in antacids are bases (alkalis) which are the opposite of acids. A reaction between an acid and base is called neutralisation. This neutralisation makes the stomach contents less corrosive. This can help to relieve the pain associated with ulcers and the burning sensation in acid reflux.

When antacids work on stomach acid, they can produce gas which may cause wind (flatulence). Simeticone helps to stop this foaming effect and may sometimes be included within antacid medications.

Many of the common antacids also include alginates. Most alginates work by forming a gel which floats on top of the stomach contents. The gel acts as a protective barrier, preventing stomach acid from irritating the oesophagus.

Can I buy antacids or do I need a prescription?
You can buy most brands of antacids at pharmacies, or you may obtain them on prescription.

When is the best time to take antacids?
Antacids are often taken to relieve symptoms or when symptoms are expected. Your doctor or pharmacist will advise you of the dose needed and how often you should take it. Read the leaflet that comes with your particular brand for further information.

How quickly do antacids work?
Generally antacids provide quick relief for problems such as heartburn caused by reflux. However, the relief of symptoms may only be short-lived.

How long is treatment needed?
Your doctor may prescribe an antacid to have on standby so that you only take it to relieve your symptoms when they occur, rather than every day. Read the leaflet that comes with your particular brand for further information.

Who can and cannot take antacids?
A full list of people who should not take antacids is included with the information leaflet that comes in the medicine packet. If you are prescribed or buy an antacid, read this to be sure you are safe to take it.

Antacid side-effects
Most people who take an antacid do not have any side-effects. However, side-effects occur in a small number of users. The most common are diarrhoea, constipation and belching.

Magnesium-containing antacids tend to be laxative whereas aluminium-containing antacids tend to be constipating. Antacids containing both magnesium and aluminium may balance out these effects and so minimise any possible side-effects of diarrhoea or constipation.

For a full list of all the side-effects and possible interactions associated with your medicine, consult the leaflet that comes with your medication.

If you are taking antacids, you should avoid taking them at the same time as you take other medication. This is because antacids can affect how well other medication is absorbed.

How to use the Yellow Card Scheme
If you think you have had a side-effect to one of your medicines you can report this on the Yellow Card Scheme. You can do this online at www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard.

The Yellow Card Scheme is used to make pharmacists, doctors and nurses aware of any new side-effects that medicines or any other healthcare products may have caused. If you wish to report a side-effect, you will need to provide basic information about:

- The side-effect.
- The name of the medicine which you think caused it.
The person who had the side-effect.
Your contact details as the reporter of the side-effect.

It is helpful if you have your medication - and/or the leaflet that came with it - with you while you fill out the report.

Other considerations
You should consult your doctor if your symptoms worsen, or if you experience any of the following problems which can indicate a serious gut disorder:

- Bringing up (vomiting) blood. This may be obviously fresh blood but altered blood in vomit can look like ground coffee. Doctors call this coffee-ground vomit.
- Blood in your stools (faeces). This may be obvious blood, or it may just make your stools black.
- Unintentional weight loss.
- Difficulty swallowing, including food getting stuck in the gullet (oesophagus).
- Persistent tummy (abdominal) pain or persistent vomiting.

Further reading & references
- **Dyspepsia and gastrooesophageal reflux disease: Investigation and management of dyspepsia - symptoms suggestive of gastroesophageal reflux disease - or both; NICE Clinical Guideline (Sept 2014)**
- **Dyspepsia - proven functional; NICE CKS, September 2017 (UK access only)**
- **Dyspepsia - proven GORD; NICE CKS, April 2017 (UK access only)**
- **Dyspepsia - pregnancy-associated; NICE CKS, April 2017 (UK access only)**

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