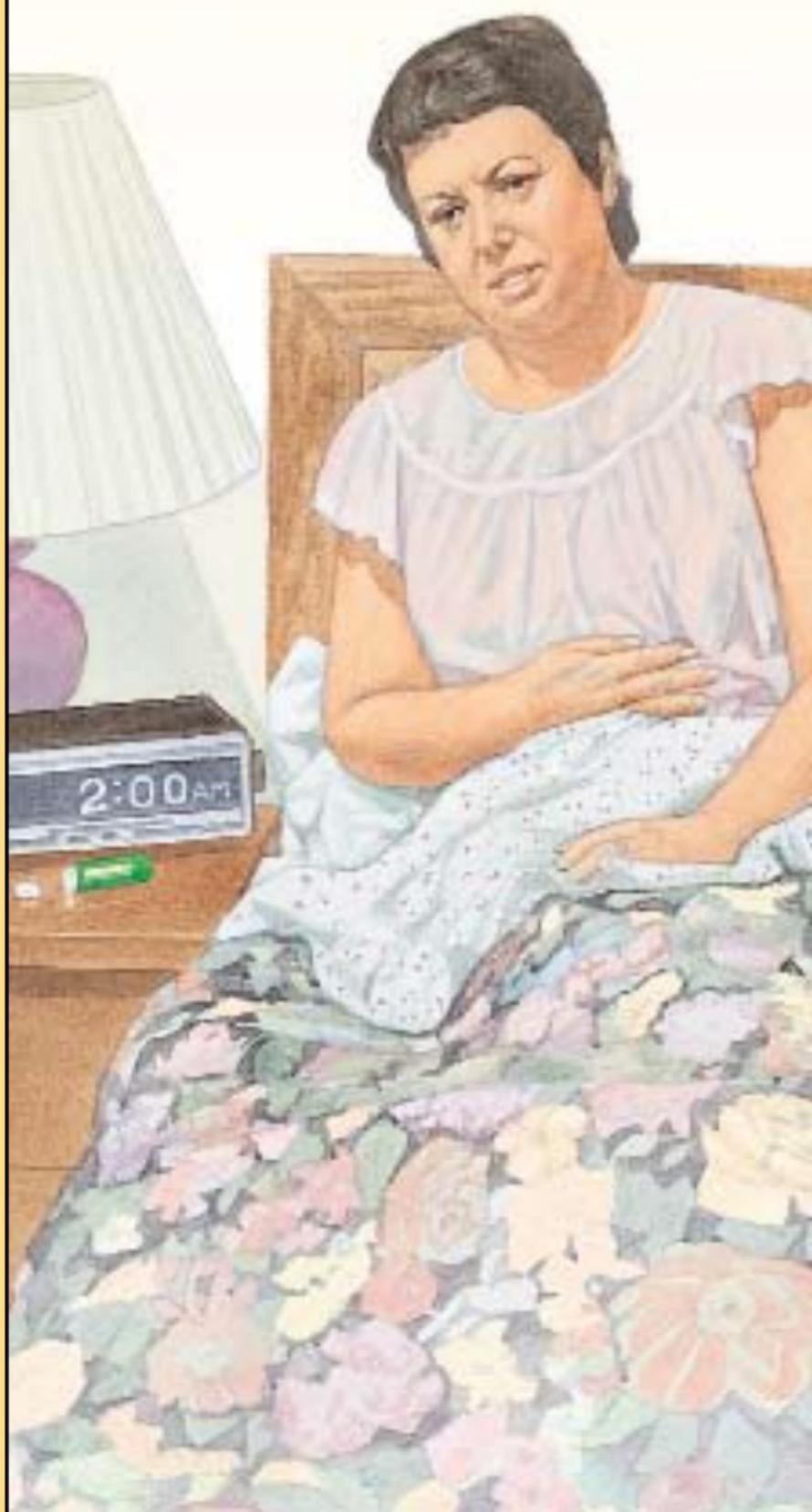


# Hiatal Hernia

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**Understanding a  
Common Problem**



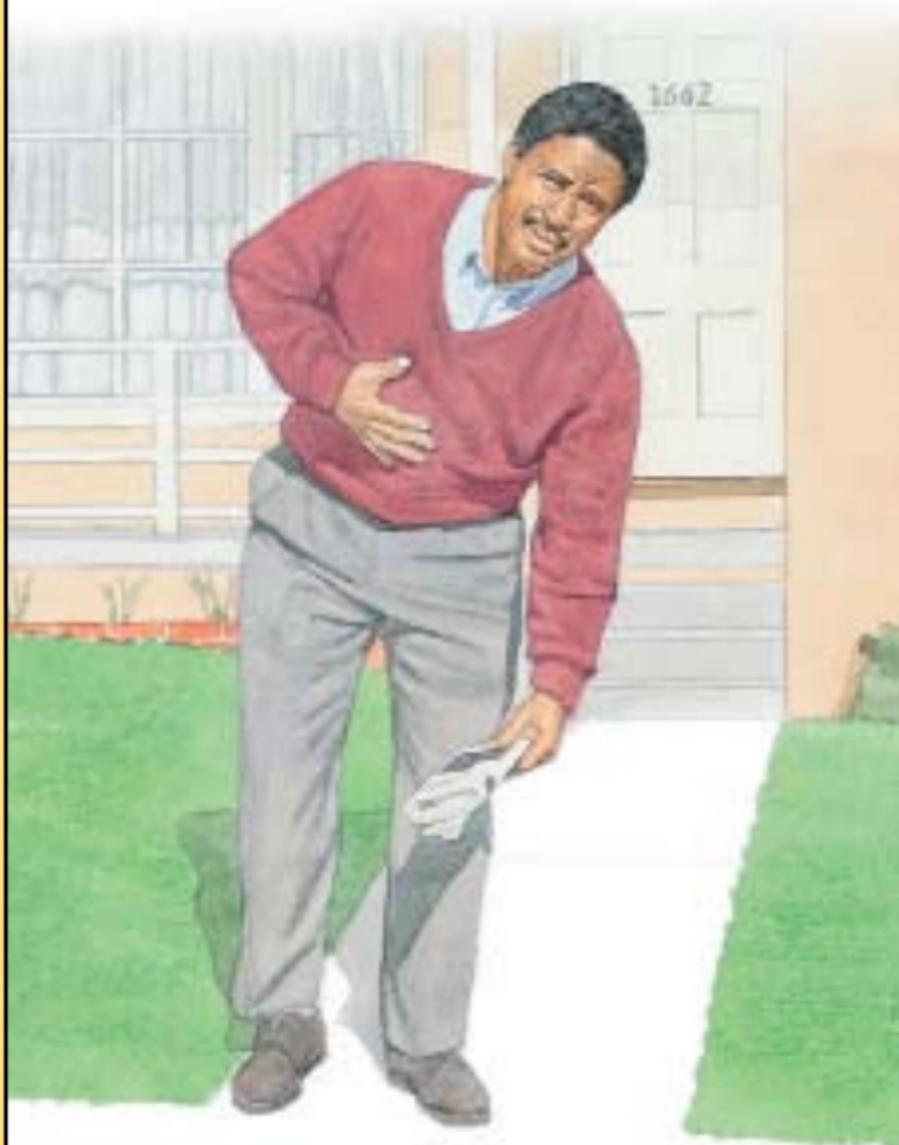
# Should You Be Concerned?

Many people are surprised to learn they have a hiatal hernia. This common problem occurs when the stomach bulges into the chest. Hiatal hernias aren't like hernias in your groin. Most hiatal hernias cause no symptoms and need no treatment. If you notice symptoms, usually you can control them easily.

## What You May Feel

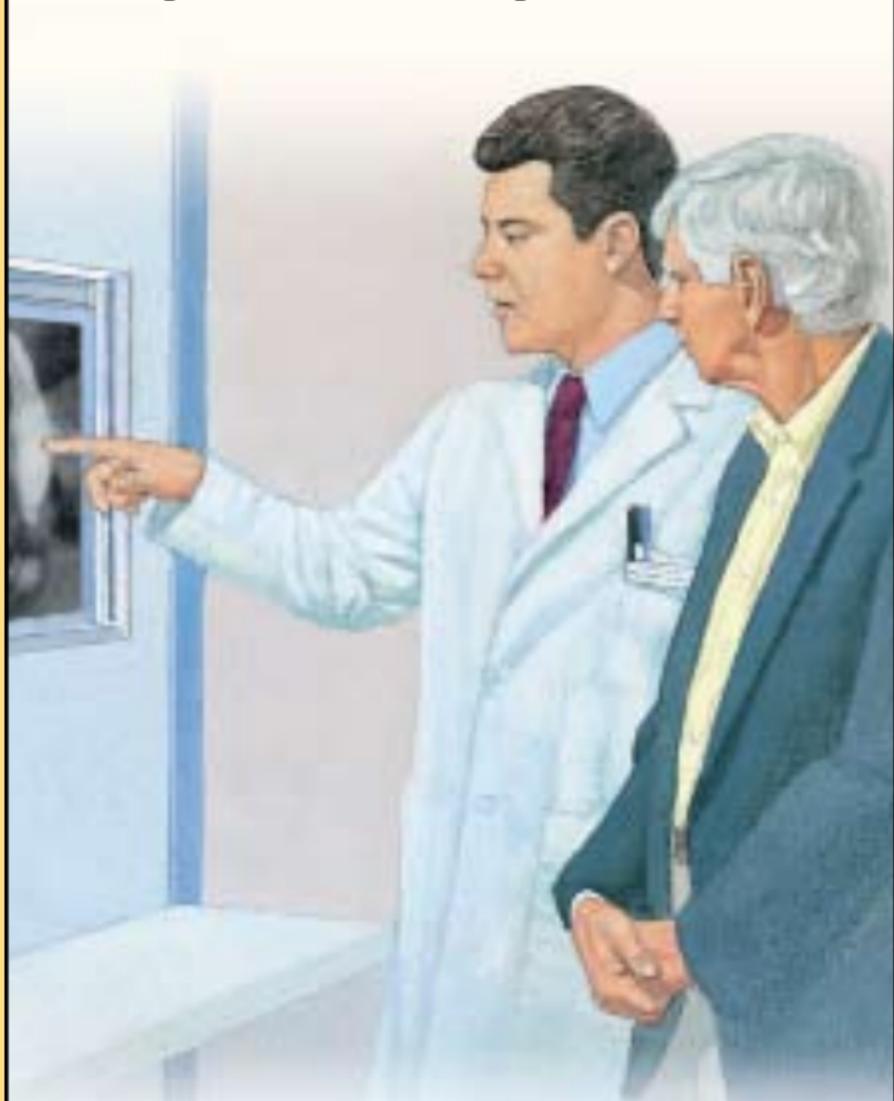
Most people with hiatal hernias have no symptoms. But if reflux (acid backup) occurs, you may notice the following:

- Heartburn or other chest discomfort
- Frequent burping
- Acid taste in the mouth
- Problems swallowing
- Nighttime choking, coughing, or wheezing



# Discovering a Hiatal Hernia

Often a hiatal hernia is found during an exam or tests for another health problem. An evaluation for hiatal hernia is usually needed only if symptoms bother you. A health history, physical exam, and possible tests may be done. These help ensure that your symptoms aren't caused by a heart problem or other problem.



## Possible Tests

**An upper GI barium x-ray** can show whether there is a hiatal hernia. It can also show how severe a hiatal hernia is.

**Endoscopy** helps your doctor see if there is any irritation of the esophagus.

**Esophageal manometry** measures the pressure of the LES.

**A 24-hour acid (pH) monitoring test** measures the reflux coming into the esophagus.

# Treating Symptoms

If you have symptoms from a hiatal hernia, the goal is to help you feel better. These suggestions may help:



**Lose excess weight.** Excess weight puts pressure on the stomach and esophagus.

**Avoid LES relaxers.** Some things may relax the LES and cause reflux. Avoid cigarettes, alcohol, fatty foods, chocolate, and coffee.

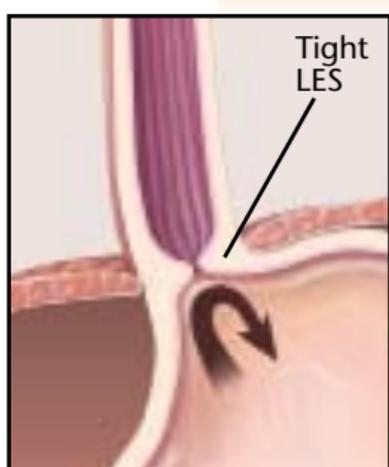
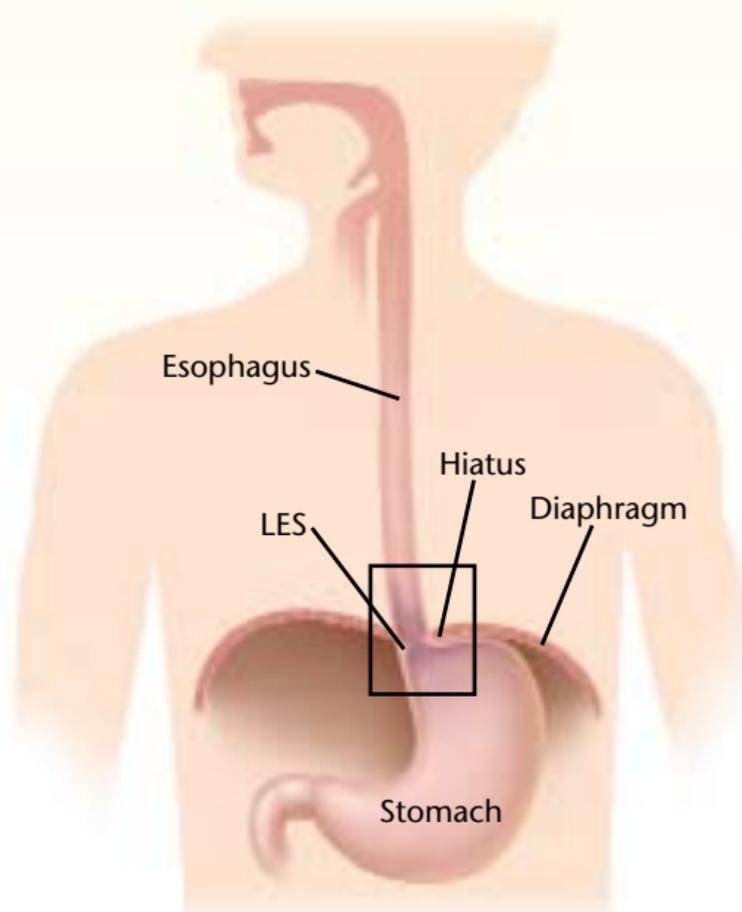
**Avoid anything that causes symptoms.** Stay away from any food or drink that gives you problems. Many medications can cause symptoms. Discuss your medications with your doctor.

**Try acid-reducing medications.** Over-the-counter antacids may relieve heartburn. Talk to your doctor about other over-the-counter and prescription medications that can also help.

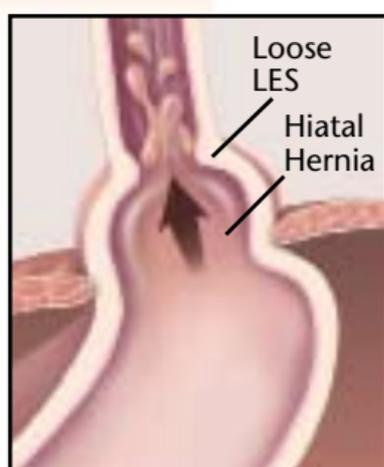
**Surgery is rarely needed.** Surgery is usually needed only for severe, uncontrolled symptoms. The diaphragm may be tightened. Or, the stomach may be placed back below the diaphragm.

# Where the Esophagus and Stomach Connect

The esophagus is a muscular tube that links the throat to the stomach. At the bottom of the esophagus is the **lower esophageal sphincter (LES)**. The LES acts as a valve. It passes through an opening (**hiatus**) in the **diaphragm**. The diaphragm is a sheet of muscle between the chest and abdomen.



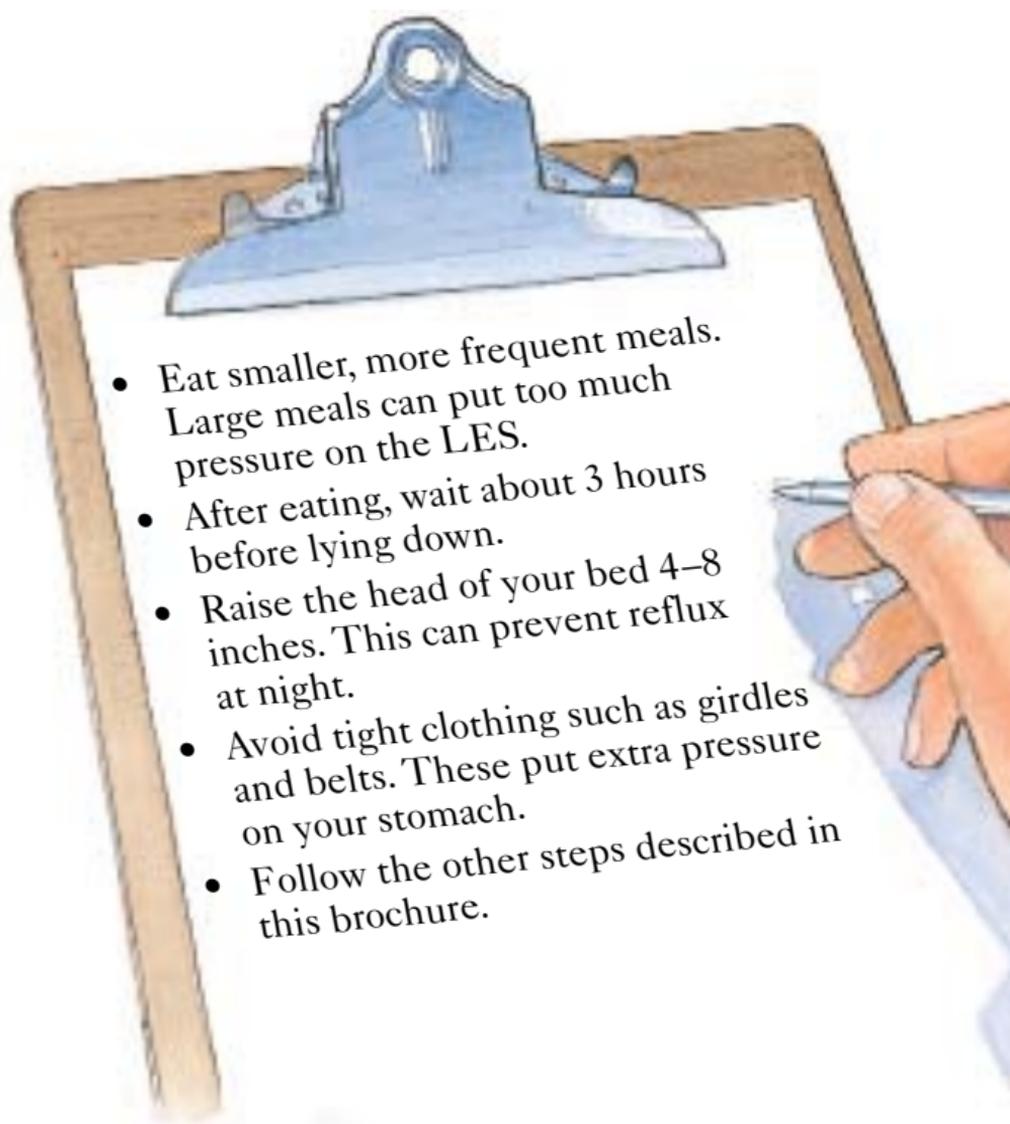
Normally when you eat, food moves down the esophagus. The LES relaxes to allow food to pass into the stomach. It tightens again to keep food and digestive acids down in the stomach.



If the hiatus is too wide, part of the stomach may bulge above the diaphragm. This bulge is called a **hernia**. If the LES is not tight, stomach acid may move up into the esophagus (**reflux**).

# More Tips for Relief

There is more you can do to relieve any hiatal hernia symptoms. Try these tips.



- Eat smaller, more frequent meals. Large meals can put too much pressure on the LES.
- After eating, wait about 3 hours before lying down.
- Raise the head of your bed 4–8 inches. This can prevent reflux at night.
- Avoid tight clothing such as girdles and belts. These put extra pressure on your stomach.
- Follow the other steps described in this brochure.

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