

PROTON PUMP INHIBITORS FOR HEARTBURN

A treatment at risk of being overused, as indicated by the: The Italian College of General Practice and Primary Care

Proton pump inhibitors (PPI) are very widely sold drugs, useful in reducing the production of stomach acid.

They should not be prescribed for minor disturbances and, in any case, should never be prescribed lightly as they can cause major side effects. The continuous use of PPIs is probably correlated with an increased risk of intestinal and lung infections in the short term, and bone fracture after a year of use.

➤ PPIs are regularly prescribed in combination with treatment when there is a risk of potential damage to the stomach. This applies both when such risk has been established, like in treatment based on non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) and when such risk has not been established, like for treatment based on steroidal drugs, anticoagulants, antineoplastic agents and antibiotics.

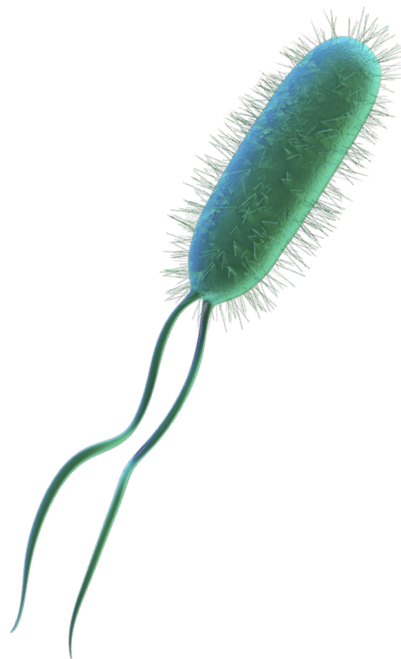
➤ PPIs are considered useful drugs in tackling the symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux and are to be taken only when truly necessary, and at the lowest dose needed to control the symptoms. However, it is strongly recommended that the patient suspends them periodically. In this case, the primary discontinuation risk is the intensification of symptoms, which may eventually require a cyclical intake.

➤ PPIs should not be routinely prescribed to

patients with minor heartburn who are not at risk for ulcer disease.

LET'S UNDERSTAND WHY

Proton pump inhibitors block the production of stomach acid at the source, acting on an organism (the proton pump) found in the stomach cells. The active ingredients on the market are esomeprazole, lansoprazole, pantoprazole and rabeprazole, which are basically similar as far as effectiveness and safety.



They are effective, but have side effects that make them inappropriate for minor heartburn that is not connected with an ulcer or reflux oesophagitis.

➤ Besides a series of common side effects (constipation, diarrhoea, flatulence, nausea...), there may also be more serious side effects, including the increased risk of bone fractures.

➤ Taking a PPI compress every day may reduce the production of stomach acid so much that it impedes normal digestive processes and alters the intestinal bacterial flora, causing profound changes in stomach physiology, possibly paving the way for other problems.

WHEN THEY MAY BE ADVISABLE

Proton pump inhibitors are to be used for brief cycles only for:

- established duodenal or gastric ulcers, possibly accompanied by treatment to eradicate the *Helicobacter pylori* infection when this is the cause of the ulcer;
- the illness of reflux oesophagitis.

To learn more: "Bruciore di stomaco?", Test Salute 106, October 2013 (in Italian) available on www.altroconsumo.it in "magazine archive".

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HEARTBURN: ADVICE FROM ALTROCONSUMO



➤ Heartburn, like all common minor digestive disturbances (swelling, fullness, nausea, belching...), may often resolve simply by changing one's lifestyle, particularly at the table.

➤ Special consideration should be given to eating well and slowly, chewing properly and paying attention to eating habits (not in front of the TV, for example), losing weight if necessary, quitting smoking and avoiding foods and beverages that bring on symptoms. If symptoms don't improve, it is best to consult a doctor.

➤ When acidity is the prevailing symptom, it is often sufficient to turn to a baking soda-based antacid, magnesium salts or a combination of magnesium salts and aluminium. If the symptoms still do not improve, it is best to consult a doctor.

➤ If the problem does not resolve or presents itself again, it is best to consult a doctor for further evaluations.