

Esophageal Cancer

Description

A malignant (cancerous) tumor of the esophagus. This is the tube connecting the mouth to the stomach. This type of cancer usually affects adults over age 60 and both sexes, but is more common in men.

Frequent Signs and Symptoms

- Early cancer does not usually cause symptoms.
- Swallowing difficulty that gradually gets worse.
- Pain when swallowing.
- Rapid weight loss.
- Chronic cough. May cough up blood
- Hoarseness.
- Feeling weak and tired.
- Vomiting.

Causes

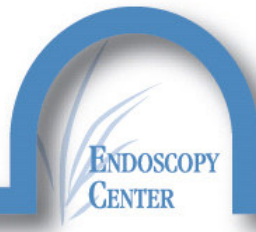
Unknown. Risk factors for one type of cancer are due to smoking or alcohol use. Risk factors for a second type of cancer are due to esophageal conditions. Most esophagus cancers are primary (they begin there). Some are secondary (they spread from cancer elsewhere in the body).

Risk increases with:

- Aged over 60 and male.
- Smoking (including cigarettes, pipes, or cigars) or smokeless tobacco.
- Excessive alcohol use.
- Barrett's esophagus (a precancerous condition).
- Previous esophagus, head, or neck cancer.
- Hiatal hernia.
- Esophageal stricture.
- Chronic gastric reflux (gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD).

Preventive Measures

- Don't smoke.
- Don't drink more than 1 or 2 alcoholic drinks, if any, a day.
- Obtain medical care for any gastrointestinal disorders.



Expected Outcomes

- Recovery improves if diagnosed at an early stage. The diagnosis often comes too late for effective treatment. However, symptoms can be relieved or controlled.
- Research into causes and treatment continues. There is hope for improved treatment and cure.

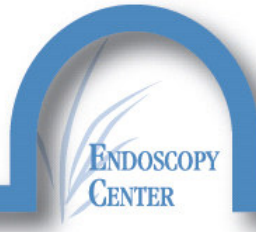
Possible Complications

If treatment is delayed, esophagus cancer spreads rapidly to the lungs, liver, brain, and bones.

Esophageal Cancer – Diagnosis & Treatment

General Measures

- Your health care provider will do a physical exam and ask questions about any symptoms. A number of medical tests will be done. The tests first help diagnose the cancer and then determine if it has spread (staging).
- Treatment varies and depends on the location and size of the tumor, any spread of the cancer, your health, age, and preferences. Treatment may include chemotherapy (anticancer drugs) and/or radiation therapy, surgery, and biologic therapy.
- Chemotherapy uses drugs and radiation therapy uses radiation to attack the cancer cells. Biologic therapy uses the body's immune system to fight cancer.
- Surgery may be performed to remove the tumor if the cancer has not spread in the body.
- Procedures may be done to allow passage of food and liquids.
- Treatment may involve steps to relieve symptoms and make you comfortable, rather than treating the cancer.
- Stop smoking or the use of any tobacco product.
- Counseling may help you cope with having cancer.
- To learn more: The American Cancer Society, 800-ACS-2345, website: www.cancer.org; or the National Cancer Institute at 800-4-CANCER, website: www.nci.nih.gov.



Medications

Your health care provider may prescribe:

- Pain relievers.
- Tranquilizers to reduce anxiety.
- Chemotherapy (anticancer drugs).
- Anticholinergics or calcium-channel blockers for esophageal spasms.

Activity

Remain as active as possible.

Diet

Soft to liquid. Prior to surgery, special nutritional support may be required (such as a feeding tube).

Follow up with your provider if:

- You or a family member has symptoms of cancer of the esophagus, especially difficulty swallowing.
- Pain gets worse despite treatment.