

Link Between Acid Reflux and Esophagus Cancer

Marty Driesler Cancer Project

Every year over 13,000 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with esophageal cancer and more than 12,000 die from it. Only half the patients who are diagnosed with esophageal cancer are curable and overall survival after diagnosis is very poor.

Esophageal acid reflux disease is one of the known risk factors for esophageal cancer. Three counties in Kentucky's 5th Congressional District (Pulaski, Laurel and Whitney) have the highest rates of esophageal cancer in the nation. The University of Kentucky's Markey Cancer Center and health care professionals in the 5th District are joining forces to fight this cancer.

What is Acid Reflux or Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)?

GERD, or acid reflux, happens when liquid in the stomach regurgitates into the esophagus. The liquid that backs up into the esophagus usually contains acid. Although other products can be a part of the refluxed liquid, the acid inflames and damages the esophagus.

GERD is a chronic condition; once it begins, it is likely to stay. If the acid refluxing into the esophagus damages the tissue there, that damage is also chronic. After the esophagus has healed with treatment and treatment stops, the condition will return within a few months. Once treatment begins, it will need to continue indefinitely.

What are the symptoms of Uncomplicated GERD?

Heartburn

Heartburn is usually described as a burning pain in the middle of the chest. It may start high in the abdomen or may extend up into the neck. Some patients experience sharp or pressure-like pain. In other patients, the pain may extend to the back. Heartburn usually occurs after meals. Gravity assists when patients lie down, causing reflux to occur more easily.

Regurgitation

In GERD, usually small quantities of liquid reach the esophagus and the liquid stays in the lower esophagus although the amount can be considerable in some patients.

Nausea

Although not as common with GERD, nausea in some patients may be frequent or severe and may result in vomiting.

What Causes Gerd?

There probably are many causes of GERD and different causes may effect different people or even the same person at different times. Factors that contribute to GERD are the lower esophageal sphincter, Hiatal hernia, esophageal contractions, and emptying of the stomach.

What complications appear with GERD?

- Ulcers
- Strictures
- Barrett's esophagus
- Cough and asthma
- Inflammation of the throat and larynx
- Inflammation and infection of the lungs
- Fluid in the sinuses and middle ears

What is Barrett's Esophagus?

Barrett's esophagus can happen when stomach acid goes into your esophagus and makes changes in the lining. Barrett's esophagus sometimes leads to cancer.

People who have had GERD for a long time have a higher risk of getting Barrett's esophagus. This problem is much more common in white men. Smokers and obese people also have a higher risk. Barrett's is more common in people older than 50 years. Most people with Barrett's are diagnosed after 60 years of age.

When Should I See My Doctor?

If you have heartburn three or more times a week, or you have had heartburn for many years, you should see your doctor about Barrett's esophagus.

Doctors usually treat Barrett's esophagus with medicines called proton pump inhibitors. These medicines cut down on the amount of acid in your stomach. Sometimes, surgery can make less stomach acid get into your esophagus.

Why this Study?

The three counties participating in this study are well suited for a study of this relatively rare esophageal cancer. From these counties, we will recruit subjects with long-standing GERD and/or Barrett's esophagus to participate in a study.

Questionnaires, medical records, endoscopies, interviews, and biologic samples will be used to gather data. This information may help us understand the development or presence of Barrett's, and its progression to dysplasia, a pre-cancerous condition. A known risk factor for development of esophageal cancers.

What are We Looking For?

We are looking for an explanation of the association between Barrett's esophagus and variety of risk factors, including smoking, drinking, duration of reflux symptoms, frequency of reflux symptoms, use of medication to control symptoms, and other related factors.

Who Can Participate in this Study?

- People 18 years and older who provide demographic and smoking information during a brief telephone survey.

And one of the following:

- People who have a 10 year or more documented history of acid reflux disease
- People 50 years old or older with long standing reflux symptoms
- People 60 years old or older with a history of reflux symptoms once a week
- People of any age and any reflux duration with alarm symptoms (undesired and unexplained weight loss, dysphagia, odynophagia, and vomiting)
- People with diagnosed Barrett's esophagus and/or higher grade esophagitis

Resources

Marty Driesler Cancer Project

To find out how you can participate in the esophageal study, email write, call, or:

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