

Care Gram

Esophagitis and Stricture

Normal Anatomy

The esophagus is the food tube that carries food and liquid from the mouth to the stomach. The stomach churns the food and secretes a strong acid to break down (digest) the food. A special muscle located at the end of the esophagus (lower esophageal sphincter or LES), normally prevents the digested food and acid from flowing back from the stomach into the esophagus. However, the LES muscle does not always work like it should. It can be weakened by a number of factors, such as eating a large meal. The following also weaken the LES muscle and allow reflux of stomach juices:

- Nicotine (cigarettes) and tobacco products
- Coffee
- Fried or fatty foods
- Peppermints
- Chocolate
- Pregnancy

What Is Esophagitis?

When stomach acid backs up (reflux) into the esophagus the tissues become red and swollen. This swelling and redness is known as esophagitis. When the swelling and redness is severe, ulcers (sores) develop in the esophagus.

Signs and Symptoms

You may have a burning in the lower chest that may be felt up in the esophagus. At times, bitter-tasting liquid may back up into the mouth. When esophagitis is severe and ulcers are present, you may experience pain when swallowing food. If the lower esophagus narrows due to scarring, food may stick in this area. This symptom is called dysphagia and is uncomfortable. Esophagitis also may cause bleeding. Signs of bleeding include black stools, anemia (low red blood cell count), and vomiting with blood.

How Are Esophagitis and Strictures Diagnosed?

Your doctor may order an upper GI series X-ray to outline the esophagus. You also may need an endoscopy. An endoscopy is done with a flexible, lighted tube called an endoscope. It is passed into the esophagus while you are sedated. Using endoscopy, the doctor can view and take samples (biopsy) of the tissue in the esophagus.

What Is the Treatment for Esophagitis?

Here are some things you can do to help ease your symptoms:

- Eat smaller, more frequent meals.
- Do not eat for 2 hours prior to going to bed.



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1616-0778
05/22/2019
Page 1 of 2

- Reduce excessive bending, lifting, abdominal exercise, girdles, and tight belts, as these increase abdominal pressure and cause reflux.
- Limit use of nicotine, fatty food, alcohol, coffee, chocolate, and peppermint.
- Lift the head of your bed 8-10 inches by a wedge or block under the upper part of the mattress. Pillows alone are not helpful.
- Take antacids 30 to 60 minutes after eating and at bedtime for temporary relief. Liquids are preferred to tablets.

Medicines can be prescribed by your doctor to treat esophagitis. These include medicines to:

- Reduce or stop the secretion of stomach acid
- Strengthen the LES muscle

What Is Stricture?

Over time, reflux can cause the esophagus to scar and narrow. This condition is called stricture. It may be hard for food to pass through the esophagus into the stomach. In severe cases, a large piece of food, such as meat, may completely block the esophagus.

What Is the Treatment for Stricture?

A treatment to open (dilate) the esophagus is often done together with an upper endoscopy. Your doctor may choose from one of several methods:

- Bougie – A series of increasingly larger, soft rubber or plastic dilators are moved across the stricture, gently opening it.
- Guided wire – A thin wire placed across the stricture is used to guide increasingly wider dilators over it.
- Balloons – Different types of balloons can be placed across the stricture. The balloon is inflated to open the narrowed area.

Talk to your doctor about the different treatment options if you experience any of the signs and symptoms of stricture.