



UNDERSTANDING ESOPHAGEAL CANCER

Overview

Esophageal cancer is a cancer that forms in tissues lining the esophagus. The esophagus is a muscular tube through which food passes from the mouth to the stomach. Its inner surface is lined by flat cells, called squamous cells.

There are two types of esophageal cancer: squamous, which has been tied to smoking and excessive drinking; and adenocarcinoma, which seems to be more closely related to heartburn, and possibly other things like hazardous chemicals and inhalants. In the past, most cancers arose from squamous cells. It is now believed that about half of all esophageal cancers arise from adenocarcinomas cells.

In about 5% of individuals with inflammation in the esophagus from acid reflux or gastroesophageal reflux disorder (GERD), the cells at the lower end of the esophagus are replaced by glandular cells resembling those of the stomach and small intestine. This change is referred to as Barrett's esophagus. This disorders is believed to increase the risk of developing esophageal cancer.

Unfortunately, because of its aggressive nature, the outlook for patients with esophageal cancer is not good and fewer than 5% of patients survive more than five years. It is estimated that 1,600 – 1,800 Canadians will be diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 2009. Three out of every four esophageal cancer patients are male.

What causes esophageal cancer?

In most cases the cause of esophageal cancer is unclear but certain factors are known to play a part. These include longstanding acid reflux, alcohol and tobacco. Barrett's esophagus can lead to adenocarcinoma of the esophagus. The disorder is more frequent in old age.

How do I know if I have esophageal cancer?

Trouble with swallowing or sticking of solid food is usually the first symptom and with time this becomes more persistent and severe. Eventually it becomes difficult to even swallow liquids. Trouble with swallowing should always be investigated. Some pain behind the breastbone and weight loss can occur.

The first investigation for swallowing problems may be a barium X-ray (upper GI series) and this is generally followed by endoscopy. This safe test involves the insertion of a slim, flexible tube with a TV camera at one end into the esophagus. It allows the doctor to see the cause of narrowing and to biopsy (take tissue samples for examination under a microscope) any abnormalities.

ESOPHAGEAL CANCER

How is esophageal cancer treated?

Unfortunately, most cancers are too advanced to be cured. Several types of treatment are used for esophageal cancer. Usually, the only curative treatment is surgical removal of the esophagus.

Other forms of treatment include chemotherapy, radiotherapy and endoscopic therapy. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy together appear better than either in isolation. Endoscopic treatment is palliative and is intended to relieve the swallowing difficulty. The most commonly used approach is the insertion of a flexible wire sleeve, called a stent, through the narrowed esophagus in order to maintain an open channel. Other forms

of endoscopic therapy include laser or electrical burning of the cancer. Photodynamic therapy uses chemicals and light to destroy the abnormal cells on the surface lining, but is used most commonly in Barrett's esophagus.

More information

For more information about protecting and enhancing your digestive health, please visit www.CDHF.ca

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Over 20 million Canadians suffer from digestive disorders every year. The Canadian Digestive Health Foundation believes this is unnecessary and unacceptable.

We reduce suffering and improve quality of life by empowering Canadians with trusted, up to date, science-based information about digestive health and disease.

As the Foundation of the Canadian Association of Gastroenterology, we work directly with leading physicians, scientists, and other health care professionals to help you understand and take control of your digestive health with confidence and optimism.

Through research and public education, we aim to:

 <p>REDUCE the incidence and prevalence of digestive disorders</p>	 <p>IMPROVE understanding of digestive health issues</p>
 <p>SUPPORT those suffering from digestive disorders</p>	 <p>ENHANCE quality of life for those living with digestive disorders</p>

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Canadian Digestive Health Foundation
 2525 Old Bronte Road
 Oakville, ON L6M 4J2
 Tel: 905.847.2002
 info@CDHF.ca