

Barrett's Esophagus

If you've had heartburn or acid reflux over a long period of time, you may have been told that you have **GERD** (gastro-esophageal reflux disease). GERD is a common and treatable digestive problem. If GERD goes untreated or lasts a long time, it can lead to other problems. One of those problems is Barrett's esophagus.

What is Barrett's esophagus?

Barrett's esophagus is a condition in which the normal lining of the esophagus (swallowing tube) has been damaged, and cells lining the esophagus are abnormal. This abnormal tissue is called Barrett's tissue.

People with this condition are at greater risk for a cancer of the esophagus called **adenocarcinoma**. Although the risk is less than 1%, this cancer is often deadly. When people with Barrett's develop cancer, the cancer usually appears first in the Barrett's tissue.

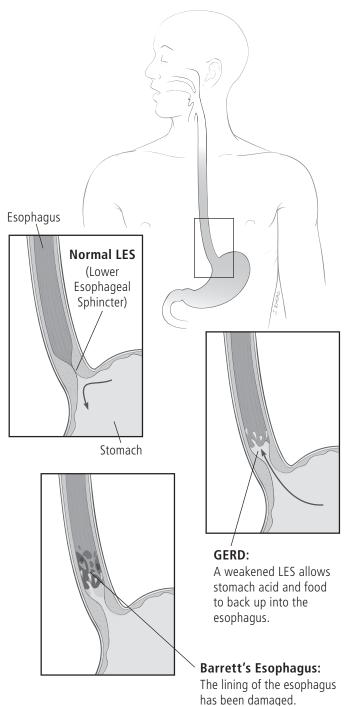
If you have Barrett's esophagus, it's important to have your doctor check it regularly. Your doctor can tell you how often you need to have a check-up.

What causes it?

Barrett's esophagus is most often caused by GERD. Normally, when you swallow food it goes down your esophagus and to your stomach. As the food enters your stomach, it passes through a ring-shaped muscle called the **lower esophageal sphincter (LES)**.

When working properly, the LES opens to let food from the esophagus into the stomach, and then closes behind it. When it's not working properly, food and stomach acid can move back up (reflux) into the esophagus and throat. The stomach acid can irritate the esophagus and cause heartburn, indigestion, and difficulty swallowing. When this condition continues, it becomes GERD. If GERD lasts a long time, it can change the lining of the esophagus and cause Barrett's esophagus. Barrett's esophagus occurs in about 10% of people with GERD.

People who don't have GERD can also get Barrett's esophagus, although it's rare. It's most common in white males over 50, and it's uncommon in children.



What are the symptoms — and when should I see a doctor?

Barrett's esophagus does not have its own symptoms. The only way to know if you have it is for your doctor to do an **endoscopy**. An endoscopy is a procedure that allows the doctor to look at the inside of your esophagus.

Most people with Barrett's esophagus, however, also have GERD. **Call your doctor** if you have ongoing symptoms of GERD, such as:

- Frequent heartburn or chest pain, especially when lying down
- Trouble swallowing
- Sour-tasting fluid backing up into your mouth
- Coughing a lot
- Wheezing or hoarseness
- Symptoms that get worse when you eat, bend over, or lie down

Some symptoms may mean that GERD is more severe, and that you're at greater risk for Barrett's. **Contact your doctor right away** if you have these symptoms:

- Trouble swallowing
- Vomiting red blood or blood that looks like coffee grounds
- Black, tarry, or bloody stools
- Unexpected weight loss

How is it treated?

If you have Barrett's esophagus, your doctor may recommend one or more of the following:

- **Lifestyle changes.** These lifestyle changes won't reverse Barrett's esophagus, but they can help keep it from getting worse:
 - Don't lie down for 2 hours after eating
 - Avoid alcohol, coffee, and smoking
 - Avoid foods that cause heartburn
 - Lose extra weight

- **Medicine.** Acid-blocking medicines usually prescribed for GERD may help Barrett's esophagus. Be sure to take your medicines regularly, and just as your doctor prescribes.
- Wait and watch. If your condition is not severe, you doctor may recommend that you have regular endoscopies to watch its progress. When you have an endoscopy, the doctor can take tissue samples to see if cancer is developing.
- Procedures. If the tissues of your esophagus are more damaged, your doctor may recommend a procedure to remove the Barrett's tissue. A number of new treatments to remove Barrett's tissue are becoming available. Your doctor can give you more information on current options and recommendations. These treatments have not been proven to cure Barrett's esophagus permanently.
- Removing the esophagus. Sometimes the only way
 to treat Barrett's esophagus is to surgically remove the
 entire esophagus. This is a serious surgery, and is only
 recommended for people who already have cancer or
 have a high risk of developing it.

What if it goes untreated?

For some people, leaving Barrett's esophagus untreated will cause no further problems. But for a few, Barrett's will lead to cancer of the esophagus. If the cancer is not caught early, it's often deadly.

IF YOU HAVE BARRETT'S ESOPHAGUS, YOU SHOULD HAVE AN ENDOSCOPY REGULARLY.

Ask your doctor how often. Your condition may never turn into cancer. But if it does, catching it early will help your doctor treat it effectively.