Intermountain® Healthcare

Hiatal Hernia

What is it?

A hiatal hernia is a condition in which the top of the stomach bulges through an opening in the diaphragm called the **hiatus**. The **diaphragm** is the large muscle that separates the stomach from the chest. A hiatal hernia moves up into the chest and can cause pain and other symptoms.

There are 2 types of hiatal hernia:

- A **sliding hernia** is the most common. The top part of the stomach and the section of the esophagus that joins the stomach slide up into the chest through the hiatus.
- A **paraesophageal hernia** is less common. A lower section of the stomach squeezes through the hiatus, and gets stuck next to the esophagus. This is more serious because the blood supply of the section of stomach can be cut off.

What are the symptoms?

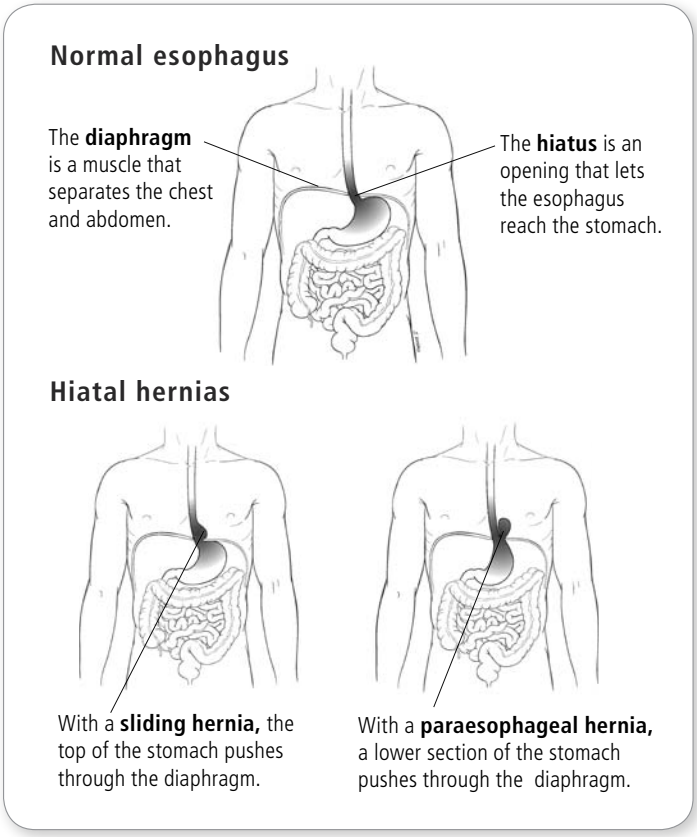
Most small hiatal hernias don't cause symptoms and are not discovered. Larger hernias, however, can cause stomach contents to back up into the esophagus. This condition can cause:

- Heartburn
- Nausea
- Chest Pain
- Belching

A large hernia can also put extra pressure on your diaphragm and lungs and cause breathing problems. The part of the stomach that has slipped through can become twisted and its blood supply can be cut off. This can cause:

- Severe chest pain
- Trouble swallowing

Symptoms of hernia are often worse when you lift heavy objects, strain, or lean forward.



What causes it and who is at risk?

As many as 10 percent of people over age 40 have a hiatal hernia, and the number increases with age. The exact causes are not known. Some people develop a hiatal hernia after an injury to that area of the body. Some are born with a weakened diaphragm muscle. Children who have a hiatal hernia are usually born with it.

Other risk factors for hiatal hernia include increased pressure in the abdomen from severe coughing or vomiting, or from straining during bowel movements. Pregnancy, delivery, or significant weight gain also increase your risk.

Hiatal hernias are common, especially in people who:

- Smoke
- Are overweight
- Are over 50, especially women

How does my doctor test for it?

Your doctor may discover a hiatal hernia when trying to find the cause of heartburn or another symptom. Tests that show you have a hernia can include:

- **A barium x-ray.** You drink a chalky liquid that will coat the inside of your esophagus and stomach. The liquid helps the x-ray show if you have a hiatal hernia.
- **Endoscopy.** The doctor looks into your esophagus through a long narrow tube with a camera at the end.

People with hiatal hernia can have chest pain that is easily confused with the pain of a heart attack. For this reason, it's important to have it correctly diagnosed.

How is it treated?

Most people don't have symptoms and don't need treatment. If your symptoms are bad, however, your doctor may recommend:

- **Lifestyle changes.** Lifestyle changes can help prevent stomach acid from flowing back into the esophagus and causing pain.
  - Eat small meals, and don't eat for 2 hours before going to bed. Sit up for one hour after eating.
  - Limit spicy foods, fatty foods, and alcohol.
  - Quit smoking.
  - Maintain a healthy weight.
- **Medications.** Your doctor may recommend medications to reduce acid in your stomach. This will help prevent pain.
- **Surgery.** Fewer than 5% of people with hiatal hernia need surgery. However, if lifestyle changes and medications don't relieve your symptoms, or if the blood supply to part of your stomach is in danger of being cut off, your doctor may recommend surgery. During surgery, your doctor may pull the stomach back through the diaphragm, make the opening in the diaphragm smaller, or reconstruct a weak muscle.

When should I call a doctor?

Check with your doctor if you experience any of the following:

- Persistent heartburn
- Severe pain in the chest or abdomen
- Constipation
- Trouble swallowing
- Shortness of breath after a meal

Get medical help immediately if:

- You know you have a large hernia and you experience severe chest pain, trouble breathing, or trouble swallowing.
- You develop heartburn accompanied by nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, palpitations, dizziness or an irregular heartbeat. These may be signs of a heart problem rather than of a hiatal hernia.

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