

About Stomach Cancer

A Quick Guide

Contents

This is a brief summary of 'About stomach cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- The stomach
- Risks and causes of stomach cancer
- Screening for stomach cancer
- Symptoms of stomach cancer
- Types of stomach cancer
- Should I see a stomach cancer specialist?
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

The stomach

The stomach is part of the digestive system. It lies just under the diaphragm (the muscular sheet just under your lungs). The top of the stomach is connected to the oesophagus (food pipe). The other end of the stomach is connected to the first part of the small bowel, the duodenum.

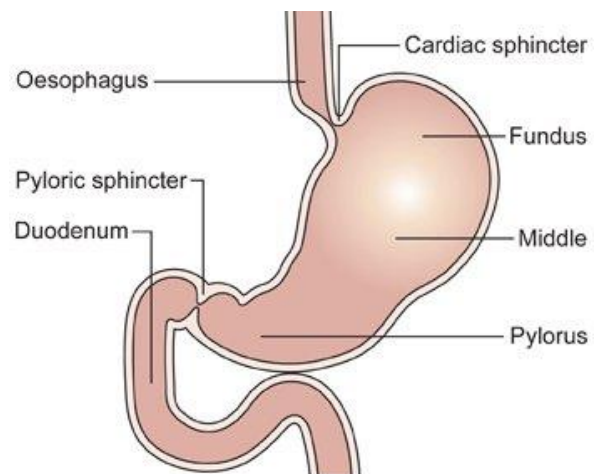


Diagram showing the parts of the stomach
© Copyright CancerHelp UK

What does the stomach do?

The stomach is a muscular bag. Its main job is to mix up the food that is eaten and start breaking it down so that it can be easily digested.

Digesting proteins

The lining of the stomach contains glands, which make and release the stomach juices. These juices contain an acid and a digestive enzyme called pepsin. Pepsin starts to break down (digest) proteins in the food so that the body can absorb them. The acid is necessary for pepsin to work properly. It also helps to kill bacteria that might be in the food.

Vitamin B12

The stomach also makes another chemical that is needed for the body to absorb vitamin B12. This vitamin is needed by the body to help in the making of red blood cells and to keep the nervous system healthy.

Risks and causes of stomach cancer

There are almost twice as many cases of stomach cancer diagnosed in men as in women.

As with most cancers, cancer of the stomach becomes more common with increasing age. Around 95 out of 100 cases (95%) are diagnosed in people aged 55 or older.

A diet high in fresh fruit and vegetables seems to lower risk of stomach cancer. A diet high in preserved foods or very salty food increases risk.

Helicobacter pylori infection increases the risk of stomach cancer. But millions of people are infected with these bacteria and most of them do not get stomach cancer so there must also be other factors at work.

People who smoke have twice the risk of stomach cancer compared to non smokers.

Screening for stomach cancer

Before screening for any type of cancer can be carried out, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer.

At the moment, there is no screening test that is reliable enough to use for stomach cancer in the UK. If screening is introduced for stomach cancer, the test must be simple, quick, accurate and not too expensive. It would probably be most cost effective to screen people who are thought to be at a higher risk. But first we must be sure we know who is definitely at a higher risk.

Symptoms of stomach cancer

The symptoms of stomach cancer can be quite vague. Symptoms can include:

- Indigestion, acidity and burping
- Feeling full
- Bleeding or tiredness and breathlessness because you have lost blood
- Blood clots
- Pain
- Feeling or being sick
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Loss of appetite or weight loss (usually symptoms of a more advanced cancer)

The earliest symptoms are often acidity and burping. But these are symptoms of other stomach problems too. Most people who have long term indigestion and wind never develop cancer. Less than 1 in every 50 people going to the doctor for the first time with indigestion and burping will have stomach cancer.

Types of stomach cancer

More than 95 out of every 100 stomach cancers (95%) diagnosed are adenocarcinomas. This means the cancer starts in the gland cells in the stomach lining. Gland cells normally produce mucus and stomach juices.

Squamous cell carcinoma starts in skin like cells that are mixed with gland cells to make the stomach lining. These cancers are treated in the same way as adenocarcinomas.

Rare cancers found in the stomach include lymphoma, gastrointestinal stromal tumours (GIST) and neuroendocrine tumours (NET). These are all treated differently. GISTs and NETs can be cancerous or non cancerous (benign).

Should I see a stomach cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have suspected cancer and who has something less serious. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has developed guidelines for GPs to help them decide who needs to see a specialist, ideally within 2 weeks.

Urgent referral to a specialist or urgent endoscopy

Your GP may refer you urgently to a specialist or for an urgent endoscopy if you are over 55 and have indigestion. Or if you have any of the following symptoms

- Chronic bleeding from the stomach
- Weight loss
- Being sick repeatedly
- Anaemia
- A swelling or lump in your stomach area
- A suspicious barium meal X-ray result

Urgent referral to a specialist

Your GP should send you to a specialist urgently if you have unexplained upper abdominal pain and weight loss, a swelling or lump your doctor can feel in your upper abdomen (stomach area), jaundice, or difficulty swallowing, with food sticking in your throat (dysphagia).

If you don't have indigestion but have symptoms such as being sick continuously or losing weight, or you have unexplained worsening of indigestion and had surgery for a peptic ulcer more than 20 years ago, your GP might also make an urgent referral.

What to ask your doctor about stomach cancer

- How will I know if I have stomach cancer?
- Will my diet, drinking or smoking habits increase my risk of stomach cancer?
- If I get a lot of indigestion am I more likely to get stomach cancer?
- Does my age make a difference to my risk?
- Can I be screened for stomach cancer?
- My mother had stomach cancer. Does this mean I am more likely to get it?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's website in March 2014. Cancer Research UK's website is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through Cancer Research UK's website and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. Copyright Cancer Research UK 2014. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and in the Isle of Man (1103)