

Patient education: Stomach cancer (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is stomach cancer?

Stomach cancer happens when normal cells in the stomach change into abnormal cells and grow out of control. The stomach is part of the digestive system ([figure 1](#)). There are different kinds of stomach cancer, depending on the type of cells and part of the stomach involved.

Some people who get stomach cancer have a condition called "H. pylori" infection. H. pylori is a type of bacteria that can infect the stomach and intestines. Infection with H. pylori sometimes causes symptoms such as belly pain, bloating, nausea, or vomiting. If it is not treated, it can lead to stomach cancer.

What are the symptoms of stomach cancer?

At first, stomach cancer might not cause any symptoms. When stomach cancer causes symptoms, they can include:

- Weight loss
- Belly pain, especially in the upper belly
- Trouble swallowing
- Having no appetite, or feeling full after eating a small amount of food
- Nausea
- Feeling tired or short of breath (from a condition called "anemia," which is when people have too few red blood cells)

All of these symptoms can also be caused by conditions that are not stomach cancer. But if you have these symptoms, tell your doctor or nurse.

Is there a test for stomach cancer?

Yes. Tests for stomach cancer can include:

- Upper endoscopy – This is the test most often done for stomach cancer. During this test, the doctor puts a thin tube with a camera and light on the end into the mouth and down into the stomach. This lets the doctor look at the stomach lining ([figure 2](#)).
- Biopsy – Doctors do this test during an upper endoscopy. The doctor takes a small sample of tissue from an abnormal-looking area of the stomach. Then, another doctor looks at the tissue under a microscope.
- Blood tests
- Imaging tests of the stomach, such as a CT scan – Imaging tests create pictures of the inside of the body.

Your doctor will also check for *H. pylori* infection. Doctors can do this in different ways. They include looking at a stomach biopsy or doing breath tests, blood tests, or other lab tests.

What is cancer staging?

Cancer staging is a way in which doctors find out if a cancer has spread past the layer of tissue where it began and, if so, how far.

The right treatment for you will depend a lot on the type and stage of your stomach cancer and your other medical problems.

How is stomach cancer treated?

Stomach cancer is usually treated with 1 or more of the following:

- Surgery to remove the cancer – During surgery, the doctor might remove part or all of your stomach. If the doctor removes all of your stomach, they will reconnect your digestive tract so that you can eat.
- Chemotherapy – Chemotherapy is the medical term for medicines that kill cancer

cells or stop them from growing. Sometimes, people get chemotherapy before they have surgery.

- Radiation therapy – Radiation kills cancer cells.
- Immunotherapy – This is the term doctors use for medicines that work with the body's infection-fighting system (the "immune system") to stop cancer growth.

Stomach cancer can sometimes be cured with treatment. This is most likely when the cancer is found at an early stage. But often, stomach cancer is not found at an early stage. If your stomach cancer cannot be cured, your doctor can do other treatments to help with your symptoms.

If you have H. pylori infection, your doctor will treat it with medicines. This usually involves taking 3 or more medicines for 1 to 2 weeks. Taking medicine for H. pylori infection will not get rid of your cancer. But it might lower the chances that your cancer will come back again after treatment.

What happens after treatment?

Your doctor will check you every so often to see if the cancer comes back. Follow-up tests might include exams, blood tests, upper endoscopy, or imaging tests.

Watch for the symptoms listed above. Having those symptoms could mean that your stomach cancer has come back. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any symptoms.

What happens if my stomach cancer comes back or spreads?

You might have more chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or radiation therapy. You might also have other treatments to help with your symptoms.

What else should I do?

Follow all of your doctor's instructions about visits and tests. It's also important to talk to your doctor about any side effects or problems you have during treatment.

Getting treated for stomach cancer involves making many choices, such as what treatment to have. Always let your doctors and nurses know how you feel about a treatment. Any

time you are offered a treatment, ask:

- What are the benefits of this treatment? Is it likely to help me live longer? Will it reduce or prevent symptoms?
- What are the downsides to this treatment?
- Are there other options besides this treatment?
- What happens if I do not have this treatment?

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