

Treatment of Barrett's esophagus may lower risk of esophageal cancer

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New guidelines issued by the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) support the use of radiofrequency ablation (RFA) to remove precancerous cells in patients with Barrett's esophagus, a condition most commonly caused by chronic acid reflux, or GERD. Barrett's esophagus is the leading cause of esophageal cancer and affects an estimated two million Americans. While traditionally managed through watchful waiting, experts at Northwestern Medicine's Center for Esophageal Disease have been among the pioneers of ablation treatment and have long seen the benefits of early treatment.

Frequent heartburn, regurgitation, and trouble swallowing are common symptoms of GERD ([gastroesophageal reflux disease](#)), which experts believe is the result of stomach contents washing back into the esophagus leading to the development of Barrett's Esophagus. Repeat exposure to stomach acids can result in damage to the esophagus and cause healthy cells to transform into these precancerous cells. Unfortunately, many patients with Barrett's Esophagus can be asymptomatic.

"The incidence of esophageal cancer is increasing more rapidly than any other type of cancer in the United States and survival rates remain low," said Northwestern Medicine gastroenterologist Srinadh Komanduri, MD. "Barrett's esophagus is a precancerous condition, and while the majority of people who suffer from the disorder will never develop cancer, the risk is present. Early treatment with RFA would likely reduce a patient's chance to develop cancer."

RFA burns away layers of [abnormal cells](#) and effectively eliminates the disease in 90-100 percent of patients. Doctors use a flexible tube (endoscopy) inserted into the esophagus to reach the treatment area, which also provides access for taking biopsies or endoscopic resection of suspicious [lesions](#).

Northwestern's Center for Esophageal Disease is the top program in Chicago and has treated more than 130 patients with endoscopic therapy.

"We have seen great results using RFA therapy," said Komanduri who is also an assistant professor of medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "It effectively cures Barrett's esophagus in most patients, leads to fewer surgical procedures for the disease, and contributes to lowering the growth rate of esophageal cancer."

The new AGA guidelines recommend RFA treatment for patients with low to high grade dysplasia due to Barrett's esophagus and suggest it as an effective option for high-risk patients without dysplasia. Speak with your physician to determine if you are a candidate.

Provided by Northwestern Memorial Hospital

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