

Ask the Expert

Q: I was recently diagnosed with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), and I understand I may be at risk for developing Barrett's esophagus. What is this condition?

A: Barrett's esophagus, a complication of GERD, is a condition when the cells lining the esophagus – the tube from the throat to the stomach – are damaged and change into abnormal cells that are similar to those found in the lining of the stomach and intestines.

Approximately 10 to 15 percent of people who suffer from GERD develop Barrett's esophagus, and those who have suffered from heartburn for a long time are at greater risk for developing this condition. It's important to be screened for Barrett's esophagus because this is a pre-cancerous condition which may lead to esophageal cancer. Today, Barrett's esophagus can be either treated or periodically reassessed depending on severity.

If you are diagnosed with Barrett's esophagus you may or may not have GERD symptoms. You are at increased risk for developing this condition if you are a Caucasian male over the age of 50, or have had GERD for more than five years.

If your doctor thinks you could be at risk, they will do a physical exam and an endoscopy in which a thin tube is inserted through the mouth and down into the esophagus. This allows your doctor to examine and biopsy the cells in the esophagus to determine if they are abnormal. Damaged cells will remain abnormal.

Once diagnosed, you will need to receive treatment to prevent further damage. This is typically done with medication to minimize and reduce acid reflux from the stomach. Further treatments vary for each individual but may include endoscopic ablation to remove the damaged tissue or surgery to prevent future acid reflux.

Be sure to see and talk with your doctor if you have GERD and you are concerned you may have Barrett's esophagus.



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