

Esophageal Cancer: Signs and Symptoms

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Matt Sheehan – Media Relations Coordinator

PRINT SCRIPT

Roughly 20,000 Americans are diagnosed with esophageal cancer each year. It's a form of cancer more commonly seen in men, with around 1 in every 100 men or 1 in every 400 women being diagnosed over their lifetime.

While other forms of cancer have specific screenings to find the disease, esophageal cancer treatment relies greatly on the presence of symptoms.

"The most common symptoms are patients who have trouble swallowing," says Kyle Stang, MD, a radiation oncologist with OSF HealthCare. "We call it dysphagia. Whether it's trouble getting food down when you're swallowing or pain when you swallow, that's the most concerning symptom. You can also have reflux or heartburn that don't get better with medications. Other times, folks can present with weight loss, coughing, shortness of breath or even chest pain."

The esophagus is the tube that connects your mouth and stomach. It helps deliver food between the two. According to Dr. Stang, esophageal cancer is a more aggressive form of cancer. He emphasizes the importance of seeing your doctor as soon as possible when symptoms are present.

"The way we treat esophageal cancer really depends on the stage and scenario. For some types of very early stage esophageal cancer, we can treat that with surgery alone," Dr. Stang says. "For most patients, we're talking about chemotherapy and radiation therapy for about five and a half weeks. Following that, we'll typically re-evaluate someone to see if they're a good candidate for surgery to take out the tumor in the esophagus or the upper part of the stomach."

Dr. Stang says some common risk factors for esophageal cancer include alcohol, smoking, obesity, and a pre-existing history of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), as well as Barrett's Esophagus, which is a condition related to chronic inflammation of the esophagus where some of the cells begin to turn dysplastic (showing abnormal development).

"We consider that to be a pre-invasive condition," Dr. Stang adds.

While there's a lot of work to do in the medical community regarding the treatment of esophageal cancer, Dr. Stang says one new treatment is showing promise.

"The ongoing clinical trials have been looking at a new form of treatment called immunotherapy," Dr. Stang says. "Newer trials are looking at this therapy to see if we can bring in that new agent after chemotherapy and radiation therapy to see if we can improve outcomes."

While the immunotherapy trials may not provide results for years, Dr. Stang reminds patients to see their health care provider if you experience any symptoms.