

Esophageal cancer affects 1 in 125 men, making them three times more likely to develop this type of cancer compared with women. The board-certified gastroenterologists at Pioneer GI Clinic closely monitor men and women who are at risk for esophageal cancer, such as those with GERD and Barrett's esophagus, and provide aggressive treatment once they detect cancer.

Esophageal Cancer Q&A

What is esophageal cancer?

The esophagus is a long, hollow tube that goes from your throat to your stomach. After you swallow, the esophageal walls tighten and push food and other items down the tube and into your stomach.

Esophageal cancer develops when cells in the tissues lining the esophagus grow out of control and form a mass of abnormal cells. Without treatment, the cancerous cells spread beyond the esophagus and reach lymph nodes. From there, the cancer can spread to your lungs, liver, stomach, and other parts of your body.

What symptoms develop if I have esophageal cancer?

Esophageal cancer may not cause symptoms until it reaches an advanced stage. Then you may experience any of the following:

- Difficulty swallowing
- Pain when swallowing
- Pain in your throat
- Chest pain or pressure
- Indigestion (heartburn)
- Choking on food
- Vomiting
- Coughing
- Hoarseness
- Unexplained weight loss

If the cancer causes bleeding, the blood passes through your digestive tract and into your stools. Black stools are the top sign of bleeding.

How is esophageal cancer diagnosed?

In addition to learning about your symptoms and performing a physical exam, your provider may perform one of several diagnostic tests. You may need:

- MRI
- CT or PET scans
- Barium swallow (esophagram)
- Upper endoscopy
- Endoscopic ultrasound
- Bronchoscopy
- Molecular lab tests to identify cancer biomarkers

These tests reveal the presence of a tumor and show if the tumor is growing into the esophageal wall or has spread. Lab tests identify genes and proteins in the tumor, providing information that guides treatment decisions.

How is esophageal cancer treated?

Your provider recommends personalized treatment based on the stage of your esophageal cancer and unique factors associated with your specific cancer. Your treatment may include:

Surgery

Your provider removes the tumor, some of the surrounding tissue, and lymph nodes. In the early stages of esophageal cancer, your provider may use minimally invasive endoscopic surgery to remove abnormal tissues.

Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy uses high-energy rays to destroy cancer cells. You could have radiation therapy as your primary treatment, or your provider may recommend radiation before or after surgery.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy kills cells that are actively growing. For esophageal cancer, your provider combines chemotherapy with radiation therapy (chemoradiation).

Targeted drugs

These advanced medicines stop cancer growth by targeting specific aspects of cancer cells. For example, they may target proteins that promote cancer cell growth.

Immunotherapy

Immunotherapy medicines boost your immune system's ability to identify and fight cancer cells.