

Untreated heartburn may raise risk for esophageal cancer, study says

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Obesity, poor diet contribute to acid reflux, which is sometimes linked to the deadly disease.

(HealthDay) -- Rates of esophageal cancer have surged due to a lack of awareness about what causes the disease and how it can be prevented, experts say.

The esophagus is the muscular tube that carries food and liquid from the mouth to the stomach. There were six times as many cases of esophageal cancer in 2001 as there were in 1975, according to a team from the University of California, Los Angeles. The researchers noted that one key way people can reduce their risk for the disease is by managing [heartburn](#) and acid reflux, often called [gastroesophageal reflux disease](#), or [GERD](#).

"Obesity and [poor diet](#) have spiked the numbers suffering from acid reflux," Dr. V. Raman Muthusamy, associate clinical professor of medicine and endoscopy director at the UCLA Center for Esophageal Disorders, said in a university news release.

If left untreated, GERD can cause [stomach acid](#) to wash repeatedly into the esophagus, causing changes in the tissue lining. This condition is called Barrett's esophagus, and people diagnosed with Barrett's may be up to 40 times more likely to develop esophageal cancer, the UCLA experts explained.

Complicating matters, people with esophageal cancer may not experience any symptoms other than heartburn, which could prevent early detection of the disease, said Muthusamy and his colleague Dr. Kevin Ghassemi, clinical programs director at the UCLA Center for Esophageal Disorders.

"Early identification, treatment and management of changes in the esophageal lining are critical to catching problems early," Ghassemi said in the news release.

To help people know when to be concerned about acid reflux or heartburn and reduce the risks associated with the condition, Muthusamy and Ghassemi offered the following tips:

- Anyone experiencing heartburn more than once a week should visit their doctor to manage the condition.
- Lose extra pounds. [Being overweight](#) can make acid reflux and heartburn worse.
- Avoid eating too much at one time, and keep upright after eating. Reclining with a full stomach can make symptoms worse.
- Engage in light physical activity after eating; exercise can help

digestion.

- Anyone who takes medications for acid reflux -- such as Prilosec, Nexium, Prevacid, Zantac or Pepcid -- should take their medication regularly to reduce the level of acid in their stomach.
- Get screened for esophageal cancer. White men aged 50 or older who have been affected by acid reflux for more than 10 to 15 years should consider being screened for Barrett's esophagus. If caught early, the changes in the esophagus lining can be treated.
- Don't smoke.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and fatty foods, which can increase the risk for acid reflux.
- People taking certain heart and blood-pressure drugs, such as calcium channel blockers and nitrates, may be at greater risk for [acid reflux](#). These patients should discuss their risk factors and treatment options with their doctor.
- Don't wear tight-fitting clothes.

The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be nearly 17,500 new cases of [esophageal cancer](#) in the United States in 2012, and more than 15,000 deaths from the disease.

More information: The U.S. National Cancer Institute has more about [esophageal cancer](#).

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