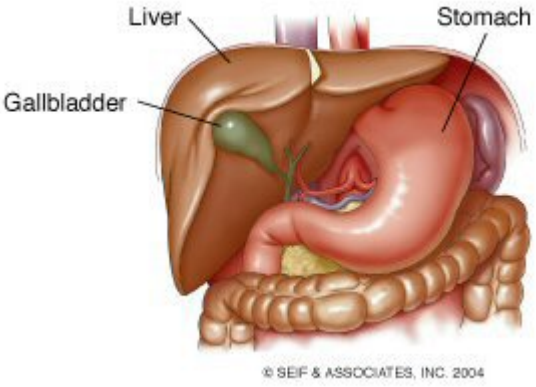
Gastric Cancer
(Stomach Cancer)

Gastric cancer is a tumor which starts as a growth in your stomach. Cancer is a group of many related diseases that begin in cells, the building blocks of the body. Normally, cells grow and divide to produce more cells only when the body needs them. Sometimes, cells keep dividing when new cells are not needed. These extra cells may form a mass of tissue called a growth or tumor. Tumors can be either benign (*not cancerous*) or malignant (*cancerous*). Cancer can begin in any organ or tissue of the body. The original tumor (where the tumor started out) is called the primary cancer and is usually named for where it begins.



Several types of cancer can occur in the stomach. Adenocarcinoma is the most common, accounting for about 95% of gastric tumors. Other cancer types include carcinoid tumors, lymphoma or gastrointestinal stromal cell tumors (GISTs).

CAUSES

Though the exact cause of gastric cancer is not known, there are several known risk factors:

- Age over 72.
- Male sex.
- Race: more common in Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic and African American people.
- Diet high in smoked, salted or pickled foods.
- Tobacco and alcohol use.
- History of stomach surgery, chronic gastritis, gastric polyps or pernicious anemia.
- Stomach infection with H. pylori bacteria (which also increases risk for ulcers).
- Genetic factors including family history and blood type A.

Note that very few people with risk factors actually develop gastric cancer.

SYMPTOMS

- Pain.
- Loss of appetite.
- Problems swallowing.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Vomiting blood.
- Abdominal pain.
- Excessive gas or belching.
- Weight loss.
- General health problems.

DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver may suspect gastric cancer based on your symptoms and your physical exam. Further testing can diagnose gastric cancer. This may include looking for blood in your stool. Gastroscopy (looking at your stomach through an instrument like a thin flexible telescope; also called endoscopy) may also be done. Biopsies can be done if an abnormal growth is found. This is the removal of a small piece of tissue from your stomach if your caregiver notices abnormalities or growths there. The biopsy is looked at under a microscope by a specialist who can tell if cancer is present. If cancer is confirmed, other tests may be needed to see if the cancer has spread beyond the stomach.

TREATMENT

- Surgical removal of the stomach (*gastrectomy*) is the only curative treatment. Sometimes only part of the stomach needs to be removed, depending on location of the cancer. Gastrectomy can be done if the cancer is found before it has spread beyond the stomach.
- Radiation therapy and chemotherapy may be helpful. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy given after surgery may improve cure rates or make you feel better.
- Antibiotics are sometimes used for H.pylori infection.
- Advanced techniques to remove or destroy cancer without surgery are being researched.
- Feeding tubes or bypass surgery may help if food becomes blocked.

The possibility of curing your gastric cancer depends on the type of tumor, the location of the tumor, and whether or not the tumor has spread beyond the stomach. If your cancer cannot be cured, treatment may slow the progression of the disease. Treatments are also available to address pain or other symptoms of cancer.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Your caregiver may prescribe a specific type of diet. If you have had surgery, then a dietician may help you with an eating plan. Avoid red meats, processed meats, and salty, smoked or pickled foods.
- Take any prescribed medications as directed. **Do not** use more pain medication than directed.
- You do not need to limit your activity unless instructed by your caregiver.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco use.
- Keep appointments for tests and with your caregiver or specialists.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have problems eating.
- You have problems tolerating your medications.
- You continue to lose weight despite your treatments.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have uncontrolled nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.
- You have vomiting with blood or coffee-grounds type material.
- You have had chemotherapy and you have a fever.
- You have uncontrolled pain.

Document Released: 09/21/2005 Document Re-Released: 03/16/2010
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