

## Patient education: Barrett's esophagus (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

### What is Barrett's esophagus?

Barrett's esophagus is a condition that affects the esophagus (the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach) ([figure 1](#)). When people have Barrett's esophagus, the normal cells in the lower part of their esophagus are replaced by a different type of cell.

Barrett's esophagus is usually caused by acid reflux. Acid reflux is when the acid that is normally in your stomach backs up into the esophagus. Many people with acid reflux never get Barrett's esophagus, but some do.

If you have had acid reflux for a long time, it's important to know if you also have Barrett's esophagus. That's because Barrett's esophagus can later turn into pre-cancer or cancer of the esophagus.

### What are the symptoms of Barrett's esophagus?

Barrett's esophagus does not cause any symptoms. But people usually have symptoms from their acid reflux, such as:

- Burning in the chest, known as heartburn
- Burning in the throat or an acid taste in the throat
- Vomiting after eating
- Trouble swallowing

### Is there a test for Barrett's esophagus?

Yes. Your doctor can do a test called an upper endoscopy to check for Barrett's esophagus. Your doctor might do this if you have had acid reflux for more than 5 years.

During an upper endoscopy, a doctor puts a thin tube with a camera and light on the end into your mouth and down into your esophagus ([figure 2](#)). He or she will look at the lining of the esophagus and take a small sample of it. Another doctor will look at the cells under a microscope to see if you have Barrett's esophagus.

### How is Barrett's esophagus treated?

Barrett's esophagus is treated by reducing or getting rid of a person's acid reflux. Treatment does not usually cure Barrett's esophagus, but it keeps it from getting worse.

Your doctor will likely give you medicines to stop your stomach from making acid. He or she might also recommend that you:

- Avoid caffeine drinks, alcohol, chocolate, peppermint, and fatty foods. These foods can make acid reflux worse.
- Avoid eating before going to bed, eating large meals, or lying down after eating
- Raise the head of your bed by 6 to 8 inches (for example, by putting wood blocks under 2 legs of the bed)

### Should I follow up with my doctor?

Yes. If you have Barrett's esophagus, you should follow up with your doctor. He or she will keep checking that your Barrett's esophagus does not turn into pre-cancer or cancer.

### What if my Barrett's esophagus turns into pre-cancer or cancer?

If this happens, your doctor will talk with you about different ways to treat it.

### More on this topic

[Patient education: Acid reflux and gastroesophageal reflux disease in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Upper endoscopy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Esophageal cancer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Barrett's esophagus \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Upper endoscopy \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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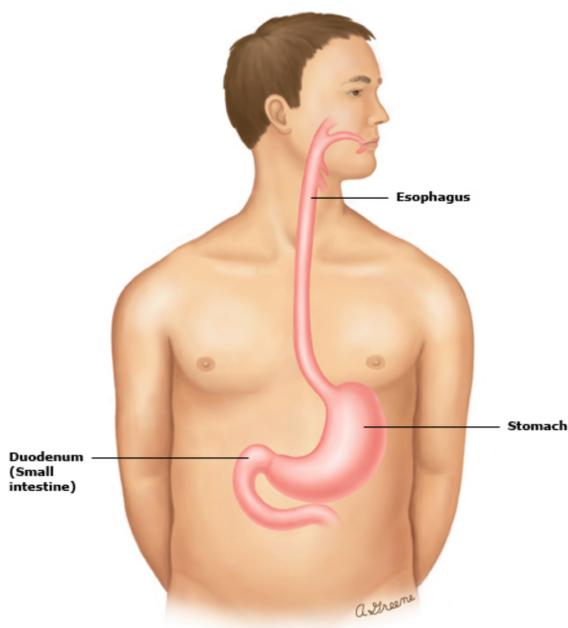
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## GRAPHICS

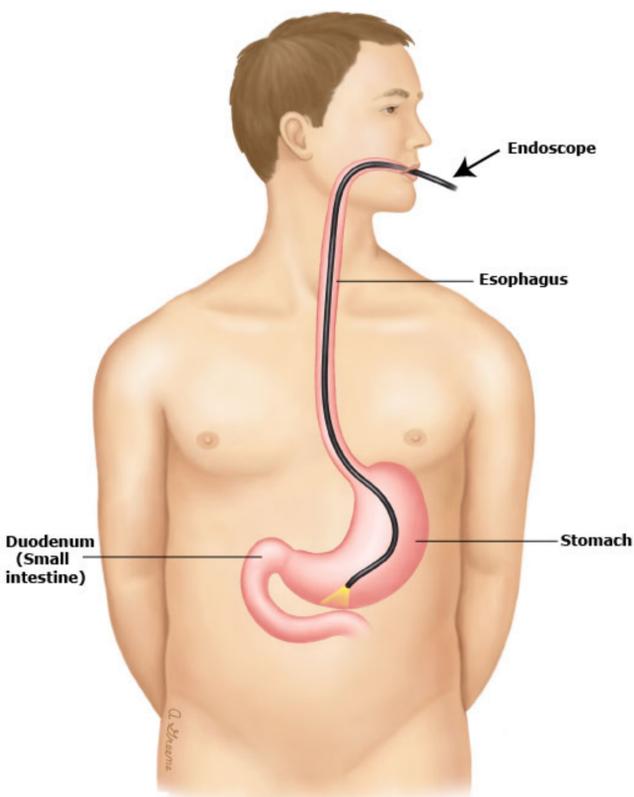
### Upper digestive tract



The upper digestive tract includes the esophagus (the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach), the stomach, and the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine).

Graphic 55616 Version 6.0

### Upper endoscopy



During an upper endoscopy, you lie down and the doctor puts a thin tube with a camera and light on the end (called an endoscope) into your mouth and down into your esophagus, stomach, and duodenum (the first part of your small intestine). The camera sends pictures from inside your body to a television screen. That way, your doctor can see the inside of your esophagus, stomach, and duodenum.

Graphic 75392 Version 4.0