

Stomach cancer

The stomach is a muscular organ that forms part of your digestive system. Food travels down the oesophagus and into the stomach to be mixed with acids and enzymes.

Stomach cancer is one of the most common cancers in Victoria with more than 500 people diagnosed every year. However, the number of people with stomach cancer is falling in Australia. Stomach cancer is rare in people under 50 years of age and affects more men than women.

Risks and causes

It is not known exactly what causes stomach cancer. However, some risk factors make it more likely that a person will develop this disease. These risk factors include:

- Smoking
- Age – most cases are diagnosed in people over 50
- Gender – it is twice as likely in men than women
- Infection with *Helicobacter pylori*
- A diet high in smoked, pickled and salted foods and low in fresh fruit and vegetables
- A family history of stomach cancer
- Partial gastrectomy for ulcer disease (after about 20 years)
- Inheriting a genetic change that causes the bowel disorders familial adenomatous polyposis (FAP) or hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer (HNPCC).

Symptoms

The symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and can be common to other medical conditions. This means that often cases are only diagnosed when the disease is quite advanced.

Some of the symptoms of stomach cancer include:

- Indigestion (such as heartburn, bloating or burping)
- Feeling full, even after a small meal
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Pain and difficulty swallowing
- Unexplained tiredness or weakness
- Blood in vomit
- Black-coloured faeces, which means old blood
- Weight loss or loss of appetite – more likely in a very advanced cancer.

Diagnosis

Stomach cancer is usually diagnosed using a number of tests, including:

- **Endoscopy/gastroscopy** a thin flexible tube is passed down your throat so the doctor can see into your stomach, oesophagus and upper part of your bowel.
- **Biopsy** a small sample of the stomach is removed during the endoscopy and looked at under a microscope.
- **Barium x-ray** liquid barium is swallowed and shows up on an x-ray screen as it passes through the stomach and digestive system. It can show up abnormalities in the stomach.
- **Ultrasound** sound waves create a picture of your stomach.
- **Blood tests** – including a carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) test. CEA is produced in high quantities by some cancer cells including about half of the people diagnosed with stomach cancer.

If stomach cancer is diagnosed, further tests may be needed to see if the cancer has spread. These may include a CT, MRI or PET scan.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the type and size of the cancer, your age and health and whether the cancer has spread. Treatments include:

- **Surgery** the main treatment in the early stages. All or part of the stomach is removed along with any cancerous lymph nodes. This is major surgery and you will need to be fit enough to have it.
- **Chemotherapy** the use of anti-cancer drugs, which can stop cancer cells from multiplying. You may have this before or after surgery.
- **Radiotherapy** the use of radiation to kill cancer cells. Radiotherapy is not often used to treat stomach cancer but you may have it after surgery to destroy any remaining cancer cells or – if the cancer is very advanced – to help relieve pain.
- **Symptom control** – even if your stomach cancer cannot be cured, you may have treatment to help control your symptoms. This may include surgery to relieve a blockage at the entry or exit of your stomach.

All treatments have side effects. These will vary depending on the type of treatment you are having. Many side effects are temporary but some may be permanent. Your doctor will explain all the possible side effects before your treatment begins.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The Cancer Council of Victoria Information and Support Line Tel. 13 11 20
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria – see the Cancer Council Victoria website for contact details

Things to remember

- Stomach cancer is one of the 10 most common cancers in Victoria, despite the drop in numbers.
- Symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and common to other conditions.
- Treatment for stomach cancer may include surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Cancer Council Victoria

This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. The information provided was accurate at the time of publication and is not intended to take the place of medical advice. Please seek advice from a qualified health care professional.

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