

# Barrett's Esophagus

## Definitions

### Esophagus:

The muscular tube that passes food from the mouth to the stomach.

### Dysplasia:

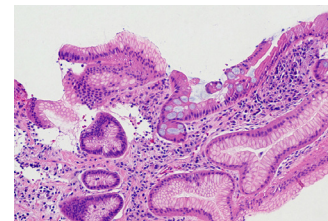
Abnormal precancerous cell development.

### Pathologist:

A physician who examines tissues and fluids to diagnose disease in order to assist in making treatment decisions.

## What is Barrett's esophagus?

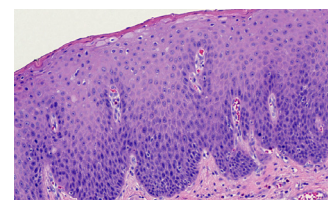
Barrett's esophagus describes a condition in which the normal skin-like tissue lining the esophagus is replaced by tissue similar to the lining of the stomach or intestine. Barrett's esophagus is a complication of chronic gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), in which acidic fluid from the stomach regurgitates into the esophagus. GERD symptoms are often referred to as "heartburn." Each year, less than 1 percent of people with Barrett's esophagus develop esophageal cancer.



Barrett's esophageal cells.

## Who is likely to have Barrett's esophagus?

Barrett's esophagus affects about 1 percent of U.S. adults. Among those with GERD, about 10 to 15 percent develop Barrett's esophagus. The average age at diagnosis is 50, but the problem often starts at an earlier age. Men develop Barrett's esophagus twice as often as women, and Caucasian men are affected more frequently than men of other races. Barrett's esophagus is uncommon in children.



Normal esophageal cells.

## What characterizes Barrett's esophagus?

Barrett's esophagus has no signs or symptoms other than it is commonly found in people with GERD. In addition to heartburn and regurgitation, GERD symptoms include adult-onset asthma, frequent bronchitis, chronic cough, sore throat, hoarseness, and difficulty swallowing. The change in tissue type in the esophagus is believed to be a protective response because the tissue similar to the stomach or intestinal lining is more resistant to injury from acid than is the original esophageal tissue.

## How does the pathologist make the diagnosis?

To diagnose Barrett's esophagus, an *esophageal endoscopy* is performed. In this procedure, a tube is inserted through the mouth and down the esophagus to view and gather a *biopsy specimen* from the tissue lining the esophagus. Two indicators of Barrett's esophagus are abnormal pink tissue extending up from the lower section of the esophagus and the presence of intestinal cells called goblet cells.

## What else does the pathologist look for?

The pathologist looks for early warnings of cancer, or cancer itself. Sometimes, before cancer develops, precancerous cells appear in Barrett's tissue. This condition, called dysplasia, is often diagnosed after multiple biopsies because dysplasia can be missed in a single biopsy. Detecting and treating dysplasia may prevent cancer from developing.

For more information, go to <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov> (National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse—NDDIC) or [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com). Type the keywords Barrett's esophagus into the search box.



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