

Inflammation of the food pipe (oesophagitis) during cancer treatment



Some types of cancer treatment can cause inflammation or irritation to the oesophagus (food pipe). This is called oesophagitis.

What is the oesophagus (food pipe)?

The oesophagus is a muscular tube that connects your mouth to your stomach. It is behind your trachea (wind pipe). When you swallow food, the muscles in the oesophagus squeeze together (contract) to move food down the oesophagus to your stomach.

What is oesophagitis?

Oesophagitis happens when the oesophagus is inflamed or irritated. This can make it difficult or painful to swallow. It can make it hard for you to eat or drink and lead to weight loss and malnutrition.

What causes oesophagitis?

Some cancer treatments cause oesophagitis, including:

- radiation therapy to an area near your oesophagus, like your chest, stomach, head and neck or spine.
- some chemotherapy.

When will this happen?

- Not all patients experience oesophagitis.
- Oesophagitis can start 2 to 3 weeks after you begin treatment and may be ongoing.
- For very few people, narrowing of the esophagus (esophageal stricture) can develop months or years after treatment.

People with oesophagitis may have:

- difficulty or pain when swallowing, eating or drinking
- pain in the chest or belly (abdomen)
- heartburn
- weight loss
- nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting
- bleeding (this is rare).

Contact your cancer care team if you have any of these signs or symptoms.

! Important

Contact your doctor or nurse immediately if you:

- have a temperature of 38°C or higher
- have uncontrolled pain
- are feeling sick and vomiting all the time (can't keep any food or drink down)
- are unable to eat or drink
- are coughing a lot when eating or drinking
- see blood when you cough.

If you can't contact your doctor or nurse, go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.

What can I do to manage oesophagitis?

- Change your diet and eating habits
- Pain relief medicines may help reduce pain
- Avoid smoking

What diet changes should I make?

- Eat small frequent meals or snacks
- Choose foods that are soft, moist and easy to swallow, such as rice, mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs and yoghurt. Use gravies and sauces to moisten foods
- Sit up or slightly lean back during and for an hour after eating to help you digest
- Avoid eating or drinking food or drink that is very hot, very cold, crunchy, acidic or spicy
- Avoid smoking and alcohol

What if I can't eat or drink properly?

- Talk to your doctor or treating team
- They might refer you to a dietitian who can help with diet and supplements
- Some people need a feeding tube to make sure they are getting enough food and drink during their treatment. If you need a feeding tube your doctor will discuss this with you.

Before taking vitamin or mineral supplements ask your doctor or dietitian.

Questions you may want to ask your doctor or nurse

- What problems should I call you about?
- What foods and drinks should I have?
- What medicines and mouth products can help?
- When and how should I use pain relief medicine?

Contact numbers

Daytime: _____

Night/weekend: _____

What medicine can I take to help?

Your doctor may give you medicine to help with the pain in your throat and chest.

Medicines may include:

- Pain relief like soluble Panadol
- Local anesthetic sprays or liquids. These will numb your mouth and throat for a short time to make swallowing, eating and drinking less painful
- Medicines to prevent or treat oral thrush, such as lozenges or liquids

Talk to your doctor or nurse before taking any medicines.

Your doctor will tell you when to take any medicines and it is important to take them as prescribed. For example, you may be told to take pain relief before meals to make eating less painful.

If you have trouble swallowing pills, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you can crush them and take them with a teaspoon of custard or yoghurt, or if your medication can be in liquid form.

Who else can help me?

Your doctor may refer you to a dietitian or a speech pathologist. This can be important to help you get through your treatment and recover once you finish.

Dietician	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• specialises in helping with your food intake during and after treatment• They can give advice on what to eat and help you with meal planning
Speech pathologist	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• specialises in helping with your swallowing during and after treatment



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.