

Barrett's Esophagus

National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse



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What is Barrett's esophagus?

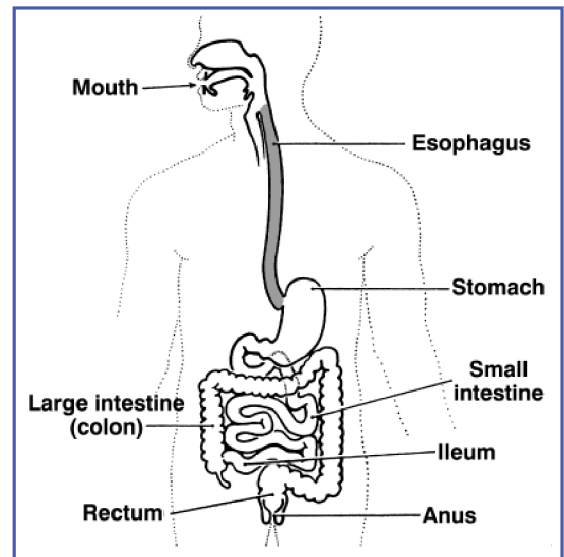
Barrett's esophagus is a condition in which the tissue lining the esophagus—the muscular tube that connects the mouth to the stomach—is replaced by tissue that is similar to the lining of the intestine. This process is called intestinal metaplasia.

No signs or symptoms are associated with Barrett's esophagus, but it is commonly found in people with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). A small number of people with Barrett's esophagus develop a rare but often deadly type of cancer of the esophagus.

Barrett's esophagus affects about 1 percent¹ of adults in the United States. The average age at diagnosis is 50, but determining when the problem started is usually difficult. 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.

The Esophagus

The esophagus carries food and liquids from the mouth to the stomach. The stomach slowly pumps the food and liquids into the intestine, which then absorbs needed nutrients. This process is automatic and people are usually not aware of it. People



Digestive tract.

sometimes feel their esophagus when they swallow something too large, try to eat too quickly, or drink very hot or cold liquids.

The muscular layers of the esophagus are normally pinched together at both the upper and lower ends by muscles called sphincters. When a person swallows, the sphincters relax to allow food or drink to pass from the mouth into the stomach. The muscles then close rapidly to prevent the food or drink from leaking out of the stomach back into the esophagus and mouth.

¹Cameron AJ. Epidemiology of Barrett's esophagus and adenocarcinoma. *Diseases of the Esophagus*. 2002;15:106-108.