Preventing gullet cancer and spotting the symptoms early

Facts about cancer of the gullet
Cancer of the gullet is the ninth most common cancer in the UK. Over 7,500 people develop the disease each year. Cancer of the gullet (or oesophagus) is largely preventable, mostly through changes to lifestyle.

What is the gullet?
The gullet is part of the digestive system and is the tube that carries food and liquids from your mouth to your stomach. The gullet is sometimes called the food pipe. Damage to the gullet can lead to cancer.
In this leaflet you can find out about how to reduce your risk of cancer of the gullet and the symptoms to look out for.
How can you reduce your risk?
Most cases of gullet cancer could be prevented through lifestyle changes, such as:

**Being a non-smoker**
If you smoke you almost double your chance of developing gullet cancer. The sooner you quit, the sooner you begin to reduce your risk.

**Drinking less alcohol**
If you drink alcohol, try drinking less. The more you cut down the more you reduce your risk.

If you drink alcohol *and* smoke your risk is even greater. People who smoke and drink heavily have 20 times higher risk of cancer of the gullet compared to people who do neither.

**Keeping a healthy weight**
Try to maintain a healthy weight by being more active and eating healthily. Being overweight can increase your risk.

**Eating your five-a-day**
People who eat plenty of fruit and vegetables have a lower risk of gullet cancer. Try to eat a variety of fruit and vegetables of different colours – making sure you have at least five portions each day.
What should you look out for?
It is important to know what is normal for you and spot any changes, so you can tell your doctor without delay. Most changes will not be caused by cancer, but it is better to play safe. If you notice any of the symptoms described in this leaflet make sure you see your doctor.

Look out for:
• difficulty or pain when swallowing that lasts longer than four weeks
• persistent vomiting
• a hoarse voice or a cough that will not go away
• coughing up blood
• unexplained weight loss.

Some of these symptoms are very common and are not usually caused by cancer. But it is important to see your doctor if you notice any of these changes.
What increases your risk?

Age
Like most cancers, the risk of gullet cancer increases with age. Only a few people develop the disease before the age of 40.

Heartburn or acid reflux
Acid reflux happens when stomach acid flows back into the gullet. This can cause pain known as heartburn. Acid reflux can damage the lining of the gullet. This can increase the risk of cancer, especially if it happens often over a long period of time.

If you suffer from heartburn or acid reflux and it keeps happening again and again, you should see your doctor.

Heartburn and acid reflux in themselves are not serious. But it is important to see your doctor so they can help you.
Further information

For more about cancer visit our patient information website www.cancerhelp.org.uk

Our health messages are based on scientific evidence. Find out more at www.cancerresearchuk.org/health

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses on freephone 0808 8004040.

You can order our full range of leaflets free online at www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets

About Cancer Research UK
Cancer Research UK is the world’s leading charity dedicated to finding out how to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. If you would like to support our work, please call 020 7121 6699 or visit www.cancerresearchuk.org

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