

Stomach

Introduction

The stomach is a hollow muscular organ lying between the lower end of your gullet and the beginning of your bowel. It sits below the diaphragm mainly in the upper left part of your abdomen. The stomach's role in your digestive system is to break down the food you eat into a semi-fold form. The nutrients in the food are absorbed into your bloodstream as the food passes through the intestines.

There is a collection of glands (lymph nodes) located close to the stomach. These lymph nodes filter out bacteria and other harmful agents. A network of very thin lymph vessels connects the major lymph nodes in your abdomen, pelvis, groin, neck and armpits. Cancer that develops in the stomach may spread via the lymphatic system to other parts of the body.

Who gets stomach cancer?

Stomach cancer is one of the ten most common cancers in Malaysia. About 1400 Malaysians develop a cancer of this type each year. Stomach cancer can occur in adults of any age. However, it is rare under the age of 50 and is more common among men than among women.

What causes stomach cancer?

The exact cause of stomach (gastric) cancer is unknown, but many stomach cancers are thought to be caused by carcinogens (cancer causing agents) in the diet. Nitrates (found in smoked, pickled and salted foods) have been implicated in stomach cancer.

It is now recognised that many peptic ulcers are due to infection with micro-organism known as *Helicobacter Pylori*. Long-term infection of the stomach with this organism can also lead to changes, which can cause cancer. A history of stomach ulcers does not increase the risk of stomach cancer, but a history of gastric polyps does. People with chronic untreated reflux may also be at risk. People who have previously suffered from a blood disorder called pernicious anaemia are at higher risk of developing stomach cancer.

What are the symptoms of stomach cancer?

Unfortunately, the symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and also common to many other conditions. The most common symptom is indigestion. This may consist of a sense of discomfort or mild pain, fullness or bloating, burping, slight nausea, heartburn, or loss of appetite. These symptoms are easy to ignore but you should consult your doctor if they persist for two weeks or more. Other symptoms might include: vomiting, weight loss, tiredness, mild anaemia, pain, or the passing of black bowel motions. Because all these symptoms are common to many other conditions they do not necessarily mean you have stomach cancer.

Screening and Diagnosis

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How stomach cancer is diagnosed?

Stomach cancer is normally diagnosed through a number of tests. First your doctor will take a medical history and examine you. A blood test may be taken to check your general health.

Barium x-ray

You may need to undergo a series of x-rays that are taken after you swallow a dye (barium). Because barium shows up on an x-ray screen your doctor can watch as it passes through your digestive system. This gives the doctor a clear picture of your oesophagus and stomach. For this test you will be asked to swallow a liquid containing barium and then to lie down on a couch. You may be slightly uncomfortable as the couch is tipped several different ways to allow the barium to flow through the whole stomach. A barium x-ray takes about an hour to perform and you will be asked not to eat or drink for several hours before this procedure.

Gastroscopy

Another test you may have is an endoscopy (gastroscopy) in which a thin flexible telescope is passed down your throat into your stomach so the doctor can examine inside the stomach. A biopsy (or sample) of any suspicious areas will be taken out through the tube for examination under a microscope. Photographs of the inside of your stomach may also be taken. You will be given a sedative and a local anaesthetic to make you as comfortable as possible during this test. Again you will be asked not to eat or drink anything for a period of time before the test. Because of the sedation, following the test, you should not drive a vehicle or operate machinery until the next day.

Further tests

Once stomach cancer has been diagnosed, further tests will be carried out to see if the cancer has spread to other parts of your body. These tests also help the doctor to recommend the best treatment for you. You may also need to have a CT scan (formerly called a CAT scan). The CT scan is a special type of x-ray which gives a three dimensional picture of your body. It usually takes about 30-40 minutes to complete this painless test. You will be asked to lie flat on a table while the CT scanner moves around you like a big doughnut. Apart from a special liquid, which will be given to you, you will be asked not to eat or drink for a while before your scan.

An ultrasound scan may also be done. This test uses sound waves to form a picture of the area around your stomach and liver. You will be asked to lie on a couch while a special microphone is moved across your abdomen. This is painless and takes only a few minutes to complete.

Further tests may include a chest x-ray and a bone scan.

Treatment and recovery

Treatment options

Stomach cancer may be treated by several different methods: surgery, chemotherapy (drug treatment) and radiotherapy (x-ray treatment). The choice of treatment depends on a number of factors including your age and general health, the type and size of the cancer and whether or not it has spread to other parts of the body.

In the early stages of stomach cancer, surgery is the main treatment with or without chemotherapy or radiotherapy. If the cancer is more advanced, the treatment will be based on chemotherapy, radiotherapy or surgery.

Before any treatment begins make sure you have discussed it with your doctor so you know what to expect. You may find it useful to have your partner or a friend with you when you talk with the doctor. You may also find it helpful to make a list of question before your visit.

Surgery

For the early stages of stomach cancer, the first treatment is usually surgery. The operation involves the removal of part or all of the stomach (a partial or a total gastrectomy). During the operation some of the local lymph nodes will also be removed to see if the cancer has spread into them. As with all major operations, you will experience pain or discomfort for several days after the operation. You will be given effective pain-killing drugs to deal with this. Sometimes an epidural catheter (small tube inserted into spine) may be used. An intravenous infusion (drip) will be used to replace the body's fluids until you are able to drink and eat again. You will probably be ready to go home 7-14 days after the operation.

Surgery may also be used in more advanced cases of stomach cancer if the cancer is bleeding or blocking the flow of food through the stomach. This is called palliative surgery, as

the aim is to relieve (or palliate) the symptoms rather than to cure the cancer. This surgery may involve removal of the blockage or a bypass of the blockage.

Chemotherapy

This is the treatment of cancer by special anti-cancer drugs. The aim is to kill the cancer cells while doing the least possible damage to normal cells. The drugs kill cancer cells by stopping them from multiplying. A combination of drugs is usually given over a few days, followed by a rest period of two to three weeks. You should discuss with your doctor which combination of drugs you are having and how long your treatment will last. Chemotherapy is usually given by injecting the drugs into a vein. This is called intravenous treatment. Other drugs may be given to you as tablets.

If the cancer is found at an early stage, chemotherapy may be given as an additional treatment to surgery, radiotherapy or both. This is called adjuvant chemotherapy. Adjuvant chemotherapy aims to kill cancer cells that remain in the body but which cannot be detected. This treatment may reduce the chance of the stomach cancer recurring.

Cancer of the stomach is often quite advanced when it is first discovered. In these cases chemotherapy may be used to shrink the cancer and so reduce the symptoms. Following this type of chemotherapy the doctor may recommend further treatment, possibly surgery or radiotherapy.

Chemotherapy can have side effects, which vary according to the particular drugs used. These side effects are temporary and measures are always taken either to prevent or reduce reactions.

Radiotherapy

Radiotherapy treats cancer by using x-rays to kill cancer cells. These x-rays can be targeted onto cancer sites in your body. Treatment is carefully planned to do as little harm as possible to your normal body tissues.

Currently radiotherapy may be used for cancers arising where the stomach joins the food pipe. It is not usually used for cancers in other parts of the stomach. The radiotherapy is often given together with chemotherapy to increase the effectiveness of treatment. Treatment is usually given for five days a week over several weeks. It is painless and only takes a few minutes for each treatment. Side effects of radiotherapy may include: general tiredness, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea.

Talk with your doctor or the radiotherapy staff about any possible side effects and how to manage them.

Making decisions about treatment

Sometimes, making decisions about your treatment can be very hard. It may be even harder when you know that the treatment is aimed at relieving and controlling symptoms rather than curing the cancer.

Some people will always choose active treatment even if it offers only a small chance of cure. Others want to make sure the possible benefits of treatment will outweigh the possible side effects. Still others will choose whichever option offers what they consider to be the best quality of life.

Once you have discussed treatment options with your doctor, you may want to talk them over with your family or friends. Talking it over can help you to sort out what course of action is right for you.

Outlook

Treatment for stomach cancer is most effective if the cancer is found in its early stages.

However, because symptoms are also common to many other disorders, stomach cancer is often not discovered until it is quite advanced. Treatment can then be used to provide relief from symptoms to help people lead as normal a life for as long as possible.

If you would like information about your own outlook you need to speak to your doctor who is familiar with your full medical history. After the completion of your treatment, your doctor will recommend that you have regular checkups. If you experience any new symptoms, you should consult your doctor.

Clinical trials

Doctors conduct clinical trials to test new or modified treatments and to see if they are more effective than existing treatments. Hundreds of thousands of people all over the world have taken part in clinical trials that have resulted in many improvements to cancer treatment. Your doctor may suggest that you take part in a clinical trial or you may like to ask if you can participate in one. Clinical trials are an essential part of the quest to find better treatments for cancer. New treatments are constantly being sought for stomach cancer, particularly in the field of chemotherapy.

To help you make an informed decision about joining a clinical trial, your doctor will discuss the trial and its implications for you. If you do join a clinical trial, you have the right to withdraw at any time. Doing so will not jeopardise your treatment for cancer.

Seeking Support

Emotional support

When you are diagnosed with cancer, you may feel a variety of emotions, such as fear, sadness, depression, anger or frustration. Reactions differ from one person to another and this is quite normal. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Family members and friends often need as much support and guidance in coping with their feelings as you do. Talking with your family and friends can help everyone. But sometimes it is easier to share your concerns with an outside person such.

Cancer support groups

Cancer support groups offer mutual support and information to people with cancer and, often, to their families. It can help to talk with others who have gone through the same experience. Support groups can also offer many practical suggestions and ways of coping.

Caring for someone with cancer

Caring for someone with cancer can be very stressful, particularly when it is someone you care about very much. Look after yourself during this time. Give yourself some time out, and share your worries and concerns with someone outside.

You may have to make many decisions. You will probably have to attend many appointments with doctors, support services and hospitals. Many people have found it helpful to take someone with them. It also helps to write down questions beforehand, and to take notes during the appointment.

Cancer support group membership is generally open to patients and carers. A support group can offer the chance to share experiences and ways of coping.

Your diet

Whether or not you have had part or all of your stomach removed, you might find that you need to make some changes to your eating habits. You may still be able to eat the same foods but be unable to manage large meals. It may be easier for you to have several small meals often with snacks in between. You may notice your bowels are looser. You may need to take a regular vitamin B supplement as well, given by injection each month. Talk with your doctor about this.

There are several things you can do to make eating easier for yourself. For example, if you find that certain foods don't agree with you anymore, try to avoid them. If you feel too full at mealtimes it is a good idea not to drink with your meal. The Resource and Wellness has a resident dietician. Call: 03-26987300 or email: contact@cancer.org.my

People who have had some or all of their stomach removed may experience "dumping syndrome". This syndrome may include symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, rapid heartbeat, weakness and dizziness. This happens because food passes through the system too quickly. It often resolves with time. Some things that may help include having smaller meals, a lower carbohydrate diet, no chocolate or peppermint and avoiding fluid and foods late at night. If you experience these symptoms please see your doctor.

Exercise

You will probably find it helpful to stay active and to exercise regularly if you can. The amount and type of exercise you do will depend upon what you are used to and how well you feel.

Discuss with your doctor what is likely to be best for you.

Relaxation techniques

Some people find relaxation or meditation helps them to feel better. The hospital social worker or nurse will know whether the hospital runs any programs, or may be able to advise you on local community programs. The Resource & Wellness Centre also runs "Wellness Programmes" for those with cancer and their carers. Call 03 – 2698 7300 or email contact@cancer.org.my for more information.

Relationships

We are all sexual beings and intimacy adds to the quality of our lives. Cancer treatment and the psychological effects of cancer may affect you and your partner in different ways. Some people may withdraw through feelings of being unable to cope with the effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy on themselves or their partner. Others may feel an increased need for intimate contact for reassurance that they are still loved. Communication is essential in addressing any concerns or problems, which may arise. Talk about your feelings to your partner. Try different positions and practices to find out what feels right for both of you. If you have difficulties in continuing with your sexual activities, discuss this with your doctor or with a trained counsellor.

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Resource & Wellness Centre

The Resource & Wellness centre is a service of the National Cancer Society of Malaysia. It is an information and support service for people affected by cancer. It is a confidential service where you can talk about your concerns and needs with specially trained staff. The staff can provide you with written information and can put you in touch with appropriate services in your own area. Telephone 03 – 2698 7300 or email contact@cancer.org.my for more information.

Glossary

adjuvant therapy

Treatment which aids or assists another treatment

anaemia

A reduction in the quantity and quality of the body's red blood cells. Anaemia can cause weakness and breathlessness.

biopsy

The removal of a sample of tissue from the body, for examination under a microscope, to assist diagnosis of a disease.

diagnosis

The process of identifying a person's illness.

diaphragm

A sheet of muscle and tendons which separates the chest area and the abdomen.

epidural catheter

A fine plastic tube which is inserted through the lower back into the epidural space.

gastrectomy

The partial or total removal of the stomach by surgery.

immunotherapy

Treatments which utilise or enhance parts of the body's own immune system.

nitrites

Salt of nitric acid. Found in preserved meats etc.

palliative

Providing relief from symptoms without attempting to cure the disease.

polyp

A small growth that projects from a mucous membrane surface.