

What is stomach cancer?

Stomach cancer occurs when abnormal cells in the stomach wall grow in an uncontrolled way.

The stomach is part of the body's digestive system. It is located in the upper abdomen.¹

What are the different types of stomach cancer?

There are two main types of stomach cancer. These are named after the cell type in which the cancer first develops.

- ▶ **Gastric adenocarcinoma** (Gastric cancer) develops in the glandular cells that line the stomach wall.
- ▶ **Gastro-intestinal stromal tumours** (GIST) are rarer cancers that develop in the connective tissue in the stomach wall.

This fact sheet is about **gastric cancer**.

What are the symptoms of stomach cancer?

Symptoms of stomach cancer in the early stages are similar to symptoms of a number of common disorders of the digestive system.

The most common symptoms of stomach cancer are:

- ▶ indigestion or heartburn¹ – also known as dyspepsia^{1,2}
- ▶ nausea¹
- ▶ feeling full or bloated even after eating small amounts²
- ▶ pain in the stomach or abdomen¹
- ▶ unexplained weight loss²
- ▶ difficulty swallowing – also known as dysphagia²
- ▶ anaemia.²

There are a number of conditions that may cause these symptoms, not just stomach cancer. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is important that they are discussed with a doctor.

What are the risk factors for stomach cancer?

A risk factor is any factor that is associated with an increased chance of developing a particular health condition, such as stomach cancer. There are different types of risk factors, some of which can be modified and some which cannot.

It should be noted that having one or more risk factors does not mean a person will develop stomach cancer. Many people have at least one risk factor but will never develop stomach cancer, while others with stomach cancer may have had no known risk factors. Even if a person with stomach cancer has a risk factor, it is usually hard to know how much that risk factor contributed to the development of their disease.

While the causes of stomach cancer are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing the disease. These factors include:

- ▶ having one of a number of chronic stomach conditions, such as *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) infection, chronic gastritis and gastric polyps¹
- ▶ a diet high in salty and smoked foods and low in fruit and vegetables¹

- ▶ increasing age¹
- ▶ tobacco smoking¹
- ▶ a family history of stomach cancer.¹

How is stomach cancer diagnosed?

A number of tests may be performed to investigate symptoms of stomach cancer and confirm a diagnosis. Some of the more common tests include:

- ▶ a physical examination²
- ▶ examination of a blood sample¹
- ▶ examination of a stool sample¹
- ▶ examination of the inside of the stomach and other parts of the upper digestive system using an endoscope (a thin tube with a light on the end of it)^{1,2}
- ▶ imaging of the stomach and nearby organs, which may include an X-ray or computed tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)^{1,2}
- ▶ taking a sample of tissue (biopsy) from the stomach wall for examination under a microscope.¹

Treatment options

Treatment and care of people with cancer is usually provided by a team of health professionals – called a multidisciplinary team. Treatment for stomach cancer depends on the stage of the disease, the severity of symptoms and the person's general health. Treatment options can include surgery to remove part or all of the stomach, radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy to destroy cancer cells.³

Research is ongoing to find new ways to diagnose and treat different types of cancer. Some people may be offered the option of participation in a clinical trial to test new ways of treating stomach cancer.

Finding support

People often feel overwhelmed, scared, anxious and upset after a diagnosis of cancer. These are all normal feelings.

Having practical and emotional support during and after diagnosis and treatment for cancer is very important. Support may be available from family and friends, health professionals or special support services.

In addition, State and Territory Cancer Councils provide general information about cancer as well as information on local resources and relevant support groups. The Cancer Council Helpline can be accessed from anywhere in Australia by calling **13 11 20** for the cost of a local call.

More information about finding support can be found on the Cancer Australia website www.canceraustralia.gov.au

References

1. National Cancer Institute. Gastric cancer treatment (PDQ) – patient version. Available from <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/gastric/Patient>. [Accessed July 2012].
2. Ryan J and Murkies A. Diagnosis of upper gastrointestinal malignancy. *Australian Family Physician* 2006; 35(4): 200–201.
3. Mackay S, Hayes T, Yeo A. Management of gastric cancer. *Australian Family Physician* 2006; 35(4): 208–211.

