

Esophageal Cancer - A Silent Killer

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Esophageal cancer or carcinoma is an increasing type of malignancy in this country as parallel to obesity. The incidence of this cancer has increased dramatically in the last 40 years as we have more and more obese population. The risk factors for adenocarcinoma include obesity, reflux esophagitis, and possible smoking. The clinical symptoms are not obvious. In early esophageal cancer patients, any symptoms would indicate late stage of the esophageal cancer, which usually carries a very bad prognosis. The most important thing to do is to prevent the development of the cancer or early detection of this cancer.

The American College of Gastroenterology has proposed guideline for screening esophageal carcinoma. Patient with ten years history of reflux symptoms and age above 50 should have screening EGD. Patient with known Barrett's esophagus needs regular follow-up EGD. Unfortunately, most patients with esophageal carcinoma do not have any reflux symptoms in their lifetime. However, biopsies around the cancer usually show evidence of esophagitis and Barrett's esophagus, which indicates that these patients might have silent reflux disease. The symptoms of reflux esophagitis have very poor correlation with the severity and extensity of esophagitis observed during endoscopy. Some patient might have very severe reflux symptoms but with minimal esophagitis while other people have no or minimal reflux symptoms but have very severe esophagitis, even Barrett's esophagus. We don't have any guidelines to show us what to do for this population with silent reflux esophagitis. But patients with multiple risk factors for esophageal adenocarcinoma should be more aware of this problem and need to seek help.

For the primary prophylaxis of esophageal adenocarcinoma, the use of proton pump inhibitor has proven effects. The daily baby Aspirin can also provide some protection. If you have any concerns about your reflux esophagitis or any questions about esophageal carcinoma, please contact Dr. Jeff Ye, North Atlanta Medical & Digestive Care at 770-346-0900. We can help!