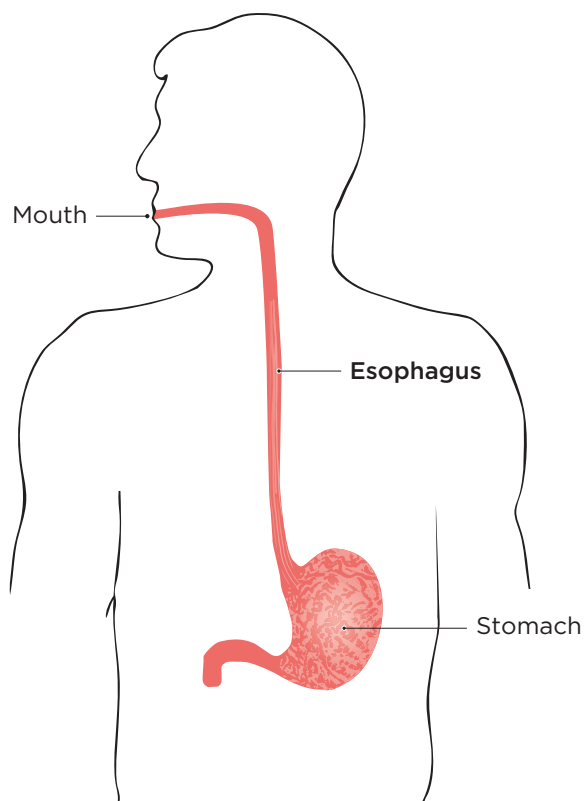




You've just learned that you have esophageal cancer. Here is some information to understand the disease and treatments.

What is the esophagus?

The esophagus is a tube that carries food and liquids from the mouth to the stomach. It is located behind the trachea (windpipe), the tube that allows the passage of air. When you swallow, the esophageal muscles contract rhythmically to push the food towards the stomach.



What is esophageal cancer?

Cancer occurs when the cells of the esophagus multiply uncontrollably. This forms a mass we call a "tumour." As it develops, the tumour affects the proper function of the esophagus and the passage of food.

There are 2 main forms of this cancer:

- squamous cell carcinoma, most often located in the upper or mid esophagus
- adenocarcinoma, generally located in the lower esophagus

Cancer cells sometimes break away from the tumour, travel to other organs and create other tumours. This is what we call "metastases."

Is this cancer easily treatable?

The chance of a cure depends on where the tumour is located, what stage it's at, and its composition. If it's not curable, certain treatments may be used to stabilize or reduce the effects and improve your quality of life.

What are the signs and symptoms of esophageal cancer?

People with this cancer may have various symptoms, such as:

- difficulty swallowing
- feeling of food getting stuck
- weight loss
- loss of appetite
- fatigue
- heartburn
- undigested food coming back up into the mouth
- pain in the throat, the middle of the chest or the upper back
- coughing
- hoarse or husky voice

These symptoms may have other causes. A doctor should assess them.

Why do I have esophageal cancer?

Most of the time, this cancer occurs without a known cause. However, certain factors do increase the risk:

- obesity
- gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD): stomach contents rising in the esophagus
- smoking or exposure to tobacco smoke
- drinking alcohol
- having had cancer of the head, neck or digestive system in the past
- having Barrett's esophagus, a disease that affects the lining of the esophagus and is often associated with GERD
- being over the age of 60
- being a man — men are at greater risk than women
- drinking very hot beverages (above 65°C)

What are the stages in the development of esophageal cancer?

To choose the best treatment, we need to know the extent of your cancer (stage). The care team looks at 3 factors to establish the stage. The system is called TNM, which stands for **Tumour-Node-Metastasis**.

- **T**: size of the tumour in the esophagus
- **N**: whether there are tumours in the lymph nodes (small organs that filter the lymphatic system)
- **M**: whether there are metastases in other organs

Doctors use the TNM scale to classify cancers in 5 stages, from 0 to 4. Stage 0 is the least advanced: there are some abnormal cells in the esophagus. At stage 4, the most advanced, there is a tumour in the esophagus and there are also metastases.

What are the possible treatments?

There are various treatments. Several may be used at the same time.

The choice will depend on the characteristics of the cancer, where it is located and how far advanced it is. Your age and your general state of health, as well as your wishes, will also be considered.



Patient receiving radiation therapy.

Here are the treatments that are most frequently used.

Chemotherapy. These are drugs that destroy cancer cells. They are given by injection or in pill form.

Immunotherapy. The immune system is strengthened so that it can find and destroy cancer cells.

Radiation therapy. This treatment is done by radiation using high-energy X-rays. They are aimed at the tumour to shrink or destroy it completely.

Surgery. The affected part of the esophagus is removed.

Installation of a stent. A small metal or plastic tube is inserted in your esophagus to help you swallow more easily. This is called an esophageal stent.

Clinical trials or research protocols. These are ways of trying out new medications, treatments or new combinations of existing treatments to evaluate their safety and effectiveness.

Complementary therapies

Therapies like yoga, tai chi, meditation and visualization may be offered in addition to medical treatments. While they can improve your sense of well-being and reduce your stress, they will not cure cancer.

What tests may I have?

You will be prescribed some of the following tests. The goal is to gauge your overall state of health, determine the stage of your disease, monitor its progress and evaluate your response to treatments.

- **Blood tests.** Tests that measure the quantity and quality of different cells in the blood.



- **Esophageal gastroscopy.** This lets doctors see your esophagus and your stomach through a mini-camera. The camera is mounted on a small tube that slides down from your mouth (endoscope). At the same time, samples of the affected tissues (biopsy) may be taken for testing.
- **Endoscopic ultrasound (EBUS-EUS).** This test takes samples of affected tissues and nodes for testing. It is performed with an endoscope equipped with an ultrasound probe.
- **Scan (tomodensitometry) of the chest and abdomen.** This test, which is like an X-ray, produces 3D images of your body.
- **PET scan (positron emission tomography).** This measures the basic function (metabolic activity) of the organs to see whether the disease has affected other organs.
- **Barium swallow.** For this test, you'll be asked to drink a chalky white liquid. It covers the lining of your esophagus, making it visible to X-rays. This yields images of your esophagus.



Patient drinking barium.

What symptoms should I watch out for?

If any of your symptoms gets worse, contact a member of your care team right away.

Who should I ask for help or answers to my questions?

Contact your pivot nurse or research nurse. If she can't answer your questions, she'll send you to someone who can. Several professionals are experts in this type of cancer.

Feel free to ask your doctor anything you want to know when you go for an appointment. Write down your questions ahead of time so you won't forget anything. Outside of opening hours, for any health concern related to your disease, you can call the **CHUM Patient Health Line**.



CHUM PATIENT HEALTH LINE

514 890-8086

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

You're a CHUM patient? You have questions about your health status? A nurse can help you.



The news that you have cancer can have an impact on your morale. Support is available to help you cope with this new situation. In the team, a psychologist, a social worker, and a nutritionist are available. Don't hesitate to ask your healthcare team for these services.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website
chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society
For more information on esophageal cancer or support:

> **1 888 939-3333**

> cancer.ca

CHUM Endoscopic Tracheo-bronchial and Oesophageal Center (CETOC):

You can download a brochure on esophageal stents from their website.

> cetoc.ca

Click on the tab Patient Info → Esophageal Stents

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site
chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

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