

Gastric Cancer Fact Sheet

Gastric (stomach) cancer is the fifth most common cancer in the world and is the third-leading cause of cancer death. There were nearly one million new cases worldwide in 2012 (631,000 men, 320,000 women) with approximately 723,000 deaths (469,000 men, 254,000 women).²

What is gastric cancer? Gastric cancer is a disease in which cancer cells form in the stomach. It develops slowly, usually over years and is often not diagnosed until advanced stages.¹

The most common type of stomach cancer is called adenocarcinoma, which starts from one of the common cell types found in the lining of the stomach.³ Gastroesophageal junction (GEJ) cancer, which forms in tissues lining the lower part of the esophagus, is generally treated as gastric cancer.

Who may be affected by gastric cancer? Both men and women can be affected by gastric cancer, but men have a slightly higher risk of developing the disease and dying from it than women. The average age of people diagnosed is 70 and almost two-thirds of people with stomach cancer are 65 or older.⁴

In the United States, the top ten states/districts with the highest incidence rates of gastric cancer are (in order): the District of Columbia, Hawaii, New York, Alaska, Louisiana, Connecticut, New Jersey, California, Illinois and South Carolina.⁵ Populations that include large numbers of recent immigrants, such as Hispanics and Asians, have higher rates of stomach cancer. This type of cancer is also 1.5-2.5 times more common in African-Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans than in Caucasians.⁶

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISK FACTORS FOR GASTRIC CANCER?

Risk factors may include:^{7,8}

- **A family history of gastric cancer**
- **An infection by a spiral-shaped bacterium that grows in the mucus layer that coats the inside of the human stomach (*Helicobacter pylori*)⁹**
- **A polyp larger than 2 centimeters in the stomach**
- **A history of inflammation and swelling of the stomach for a long period of time (chronic atrophic gastritis)**
- **A history of pernicious anemia (a condition in which the body can't make enough healthy red blood cells because it doesn't have enough vitamin B12)¹⁰**
- **Smoking**
- **A poor diet**
- **Physical inactivity**
- **Obesity**

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL SYMPTOMS OF GASTRIC CANCER?

Symptoms may include:¹¹

- Abdominal fullness or pain, which may occur after eating a small meal
- Dark stools, which may contain blood
- Difficulty swallowing, which becomes worse over time
- Excessive belching
- General decline in health
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting, which may contain blood
- Weakness or fatigue
- Weight loss

How is gastric cancer diagnosed? If symptoms appear and suggest stomach cancer, doctors will check to see whether they are due to cancer or to some other cause.¹² Patients may be referred to a gastroenterologist, a doctor whose specialty is diagnosing and treating digestive problems.¹³

Doctors will often ask about a patient's personal and family health history. Patients may also have a blood test, physical exam, endoscopy, and/or a biopsy to determine if there is gastric cancer.¹⁴

What is the prognosis for patients diagnosed with gastric cancer? Prognoses vary depending on the stage of a patient's cancer and other factors, including how far the tumor has invaded the stomach wall and whether lymph nodes are involved when the patient was diagnosed.¹⁵ The one-year age-adjusted survival rate for patients diagnosed with advanced gastric cancer remains low at 21 percent.¹⁶

If the tumor has spread outside the stomach, a cure is not possible and the goal of treatment is to improve symptoms. Also, if cancer spreads to the lymph nodes, the patient's prognosis is not as good, even if the cancer can be removed by surgery.¹⁷

How is gastric cancer treated? Depending on the stage at diagnosis, treatment options may include surgery (partial or total gastrectomy, or removal of the stomach), chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or use of a biologic treatment.¹⁸

What are the advances being made in gastric cancer research? Research is currently being conducted to identify more factors that cause gastric cancer, ways to prevent the disease and ways to improve treatment.¹⁹

Some recent studies are testing new ways to combine drugs already known to be effective against gastric cancer, while others are testing potential new monotherapies, or single agents.²⁰

Other studies are evaluating newer chemotherapy drugs, new ways of delivering chemotherapy, and different ways to combine chemotherapy with radiation therapy, biologic therapies, and/or immunotherapy.²¹

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