

Singh Surgical Partnership

Information for Patients

Barretts Oesophagus

What is Barrett's Oesophagus?

In Barrett's oesophagus, the cells of the food pipe (oesophagus) have started to change. The cells of the lining (epithelium) of the food pipe are normally flat. They are known as squamous cells. In Barrett's oesophagus they have changed to a rectangular type of epithelial cell called a columnar cell. This cell type is usually found lining the digestive organs lower down in the digestive system, in the small and large intestines (the ileum and the colon).

These cell changes are caused by the stomach juices coming back up through the valve at the top of the stomach (acid reflux). The acid in these juices irritates the lining of the gullet. Over a long period of time, the cell type can begin to change and the columnar cells replace the flat, squamous cells. This is probably the body responding to the irritation and trying to protect itself.

What are the Symptoms?

There are no obvious symptoms caused by Barretts Oesophagus, although acid reflux which you may be experiencing often causes heartburn, regurgitation of food and sometimes a difficulty in swallowing. These symptoms may have been the reason for seeing your G.P. before your hospital referral. Some patients with Barretts Oesophagus have no symptoms at all.

Why is it a problem?

People with Barrett's oesophagus may have cells that are growing abnormally, this is known as dysplasia. The cells may show low grade or high-grade dysplasia. The grade of a cell is what it looks like under a microscope. The less normal cells look, the higher the grade. Cells with low-grade dysplasia are mildly abnormal. Cells with high-grade dysplasia are more abnormal. The more cells are damaged and replaced, the more chance there is that one of them will gather all the genetic changes that can turn it into a cancer cell. But remember that less than 1 in 100 people with Barrett's oesophagus (1%) will go on to develop oesophageal cancer.

In addition people with Barrett's Oesophagus usually have very bad reflux. This can damage the gullet resulting in strictures (narrowing), and ulcers (pain and bleeding).

What happens after being diagnosed with the Condition?

Medicines, which reduce or stop the production of stomach acid, are prescribed. These are often taken for life, and are thought to be safe to take long term.

Are further investigations required?

Once Barrett's Oesophagus has been diagnosed, you will be advised to have an endoscopy and biopsy at regular intervals in order to monitor the condition. This is called surveillance. The exact period between each endoscopy can vary from person to person. It may be every 2 years if no dysplasia cells are detected. If dysplasia cells are found you may be advised to have an endoscopy every 3-6 months.

Is there anything I can do to help the Condition?

You will not be able to make the condition go away by adapting your lifestyle. However a few modifications may help prevent the condition from getting any worse and improve the symptoms of acid reflux

- Giving up smoking if you are a smoker.
- Avoiding alcohol in excess
- Losing weight if you are overweight
- Making dietary changes – less fatty, spicy foods

Treatment for Barrett's Oesophagus

The following treatments may be discussed if any abnormal cells are found.

- Surgery - It might be possible to strengthen the valve at the lower end of the oesophagus.
- Endoscopic mucosal resection to remove an area of abnormal cells.
- Photodynamic therapy that uses light in order to treat the abnormal cells.
- HALO treatment, which is the use of a burst of high energy to burn away a microscopic layer of the oesophagus around its entire circumference.

Who can I contact to ask questions?

Mr. Singh will explain everything to you at the time of your consultation. However, if you do have any further questions please write them down and bring them with you when you attend for your procedure. Alternatively you can email Ruth Singh (ruth@singhsurgicalpartnership.com) with your questions or call Mr. Singh's secretary on 01252 783929 and leave a message for Mr. Singh.

References

Cancer Research UK. Barrett's Oesophagus www.cancerhelp.org.uk
Macmillan Cancer Support. Barrett's Oesophagus www.macmillan.org.uk
www.mbcm.org Treatment for Barrett's Oesophagus