

A Quick Guide to Your Questions on Stomach Cancer

Martin McCarter, MD, helps answer commonly asked questions about the diagnosis and treatment of gastric cancer.

November 22, 2023 By University of Colorado Cancer Center

This November, [Stomach Cancer](#) Awareness Month allows us the opportunity to learn more about gastric oncology and dispel anxieties around the disease. While stomach cancer, also known as gastric cancer, accounts for a little over 1% of all new cancer cases per year, outcomes can be improved with prevention and earlier detection.

Since diet, smoking habits, exercise, alcohol consumption, and weight are all strong predictors of stomach cancer, maintaining your health and nutrition can [decrease your risk](#) of developing it. And even if you receive a diagnosis, the cancer is treatable with the right course of action.

University of Colorado Cancer Center's [Esophageal and Gastric Multidisciplinary Clinic](#) meets weekly to work on structuring the best treatment for patients depending on a variety of factors including tumor stage, the patient's medical condition, and eligibility to participate in clinical trials. Gastrointestinal specialists at the clinic are trained in every aspect of treatment, from diagnostic tools to performing minimally invasive surgeries.

Research around stomach cancer is also expanding at the CU Cancer Center thanks to the [Katy O. and Paul M. Rady Esophageal and Gastric Center of Excellence](#). Established in late 2022 thanks to a generous gift from the Rady family. This center of excellence is advancing esophageal and gastric cancer research, clinical trials, screening, and treatments.

[Martin McCarter, MD](#), professor of [surgical oncology](#) and surgical director for the Esophageal and Gastric Multidisciplinary Clinic, sat down with us to provide answers to the most commonly asked questions about stomach cancer. Here's your quick and easy guide to stomach cancer, including diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment.

What is stomach cancer?

When we think of gastric cancer, most often we're thinking about one type called adenocarcinoma of the stomach. That is the most common type, although there are a few other tumors that can

occur in the stomach as well. Adenocarcinoma is a tumor that begins in the lining of the stomach, but can spread to either the wall of stomach or to other locations beyond that.

What causes gastric cancer?

Most gastric cancer cases in this country occurs spontaneously, although there are a few known risk factors including smoking and diets that are heavy in pickled or preserved foods. Those who have an underlying H. pylori infection are also at risk of gastric cancer.

What age range is it most likely to develop?

The most common age of diagnosis in this country is about 65.

What are the symptoms of stomach cancer?

The main symptoms are relatively vague. They include bleeding, early fullness, or nausea or vomiting, and blood that would show up in stool. Someone could also present with anemia without a good known cause, and that could be a sign of concern that it's stemming from a problem in the stomach.

What procedures can detect stomach cancer?

The most common way it's diagnosed is with an endoscopy, which is usually done when some symptoms are present. That's often followed by a CAT scan. We have a few other more enhanced diagnostic procedures, such as a PET scan or a diagnostic laparoscopy.

How fast does stomach cancer spread?

It's very difficult to know that in any one person. Most gastric cancers are diagnosed at a more advanced stage because they can grow for quite some time before a symptom would manifest itself.

Can gastric cancer be cured or treated?

Yes, gastric cancer can be cured. The typical curative treatment depends on the stage of the tumor. For very early stage one tumors, sometimes it can be cured with an endoscopy and removal alone. For more advanced tumors, it would require a combination of chemotherapy and surgery as the best chance for cure.

We look for the opportunity to treat these in a least invasive way whenever possible. That includes pushing the envelope on endoscopic resections as well as using laparoscopic or robotic, minimally invasive techniques to remove the tumor.

Is it usually fatal?

Because many cases are diagnosed at a late stage, most of those are not considered curative. So gastric cancer does have a relatively high mortality rate, or high incidence of dying than some other cancers, such as breast cancer or prostate cancer.

About how many cases of gastric cancer are there a year?

There are roughly [26,000 per year](#). My estimate is that there are about 200 per year in the state of Colorado.

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