



Mutated cells in esophagus don't doom patient to cancer

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DEAR DR. DONOHUE: My daughter is 46 years old and has been diagnosed with Barrett's esophagus. The doctor has told her that her cells have already mutated. Does that mean she is doomed to die of cancer? Can you tell me more about Barrett's?

— S.M.

Your daughter is not doomed to die of cancer.

Here's how the story goes: Some people with gastroesophageal reflux disease — GERD (in common talk, heartburn) — develop changes in the lower part of the esophagus. Those are the mutations her doctor spoke of. The usual lining cells turn into a different kind of cell, not cancer cells but cells different from the ones that normally line the esophagus; that's Barrett's esophagus. It happens to about 13 percent of heartburn patients. For most, the story ends there.

Some, however, will have a second change in the lining cells, and this change is a cancer change. Keep this in mind: Heartburn is very common, Barrett's esophagus is somewhat common, but esophageal cancer is relatively uncommon.

Doctors watch people with Barrett's esophagus very carefully. If these people have no indications of a cancer change, then they have a repeat scope examination of the esophagus in three years.

If they have changes that are slightly suspicious of cancer, they have a yearly scope examination.

If they have changes that are more suspicious, they have a repeat scope examination in three months.

In one respect, your daughter is fortunate. She is on a program for early detection of esophageal cancer. Esophageal cancer is treatable and curable in its early stages. Most people with this kind of cancer are not discovered to have the cancer until late in its course, when a cure is much more difficult.