

# Care Gram

## Hiatal Hernia

### **What Is Hiatal Hernia?**

A hiatal hernia is a condition that results when a part of your stomach pushes through the wall between the stomach and chest. This wall is called the diaphragm. A hiatal hernia occurs when the diaphragm becomes weak or tears.

### **What Causes Hiatal Hernia?**

Although the cause is often unknown, the following factors will increase your risk for hiatal hernia:

- Obesity
- A family history of hiatal hernia
- Weightlifting
- Straining to pass stool
- Over the age of 60

### **What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Hiatal Hernia?**

Most people have no symptoms. The most common symptoms are heartburn and reflux of stomach acid into the esophagus (food pipe). Reflux is a condition in which stomach contents flow back into the esophagus. Reflux can cause bleeding which can lead to anemia or a low red blood cell count. Problems with swallowing also can occur when the lower esophagus is damaged from chronic reflux.

### **How Will I Know I Have Hiatal Hernia?**

Your doctor may perform one or more tests to determine if you have a hiatal hernia. These tests may include:

- Upper GI barium X-ray
- Gastroscopy or upper intestinal endoscopy

### **What Are the Complications of Hiatal Hernia?**

- Chronic heartburn
- Redness and swelling of the lower esophagus
- Anemia due to chronic bleeding from the lower esophagus
- Scarring and narrowing of the lower esophagus causing difficulty in swallowing
- Chronic cough, wheezing, and even pneumonia
- Trouble breathing or severe chest pain, especially in the elderly



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Page 1 of 2

**What Is the Treatment?**

Treatment is provided when the hernia results in symptoms listed on page 1.

- Avoid foods and substances that increase reflux of acid into the esophagus, such as nicotine, fatty foods, alcohol, caffeine, chocolate, peppermint and spearmint.
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals. Do not eat within 2 to 3 hours prior to bedtime.
- Do not bend, stoop, do abdominal exercises, or use tight belts or girdles. These increase stomach pressure and cause reflux.
- Certain drugs, such as intestinal antispasmodics, calcium channel blockers, and some antidepressants weaken the muscle strength of the lower esophagus. Ask your doctor if these are right for you.
- Raise the head of your bed up to 8 to 10 inches by putting a wedge or blocks under the upper part of the mattress. Gravity helps keep stomach acid out of the esophagus while sleeping. Pillows by themselves are not helpful.
- If you are overweight, lose weight. Obesity increases abdominal pressure.