

Care Gram

Hiatal Hernia

What Is Hiatal Hernia?

A hiatal hernia occurs 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:

- X-rays
- Gastroscopy or upper intestinal endoscopy

What Are the Complications of Hiatal Hernia?

- Chronic heartburn
- Irritation and inflammation 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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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.
- Avoid bending over at the waist, doing abdominal exercises, using tight belts or girdles as 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 alone are not helpful.
- If you are overweight, lose weight. Obesity increases abdominal pressure.
- When a hiatal hernia is large or causes severe complications, surgery may be recommended.