



What is stomach cancer?

The stomach is a hollow sac that forms part of the digestive system. The stomach digests food, producing enzymes and acids that help to break food down so that it can move into the small intestine.

Stomach cancer occurs when abnormal cells in the stomach grow out of control. It may also be called gastric cancer.

Types of stomach cancer include:

- **adenocarcinoma**, the most common type of stomach cancer, which starts in the cells that line the inside of the stomach
- **gastrointestinal stromal tumours**, a rare type of stomach cancer, which start in cells in the wall of the stomach
- **neuroendocrine tumours**, which start in the cells of the stomach that make hormones
- **lymphoma**, a cancer of the lymph system that is sometimes found in the wall of the stomach.

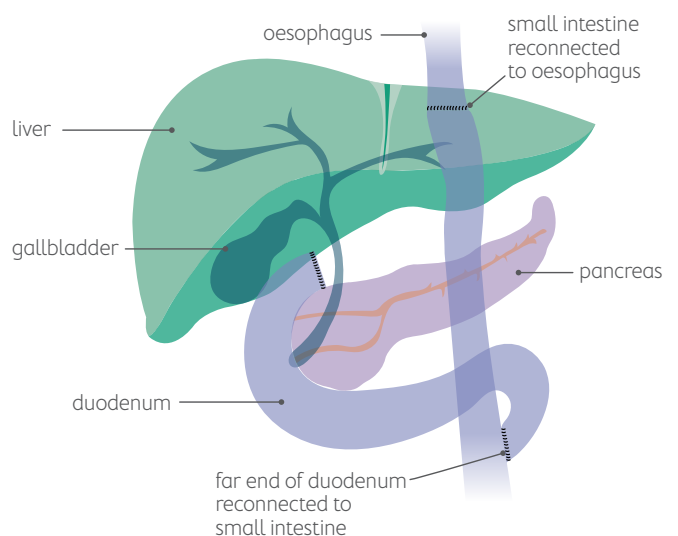
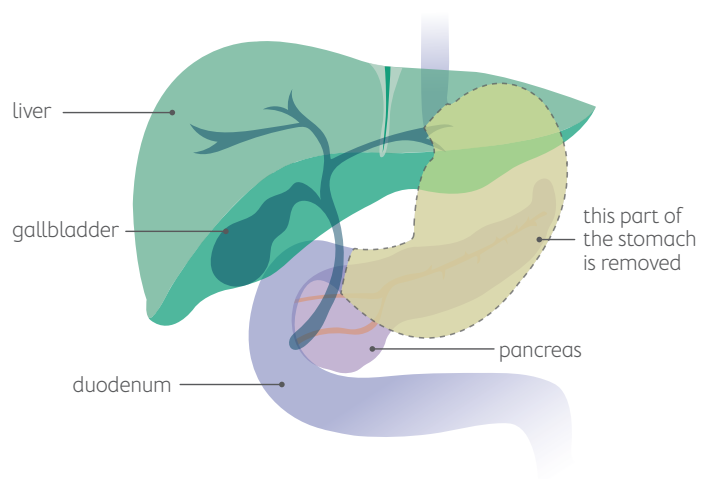
Symptoms

Early stomach cancer may not cause any symptoms, which can make it hard to detect. However, as the disease progresses, you might experience:

- difficulty swallowing
- feeling full quickly
- heartburn or indigestion that doesn't go away
- discomfort or bloating in the abdomen
- unexplained weight loss
- unexplained extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- blood in stool or vomit (which may look like coffee grounds)
- feeling sick (nausea) or vomiting.

If you experience any of these symptoms, it's important to see a doctor.

Total gastrectomy





Causes and risk factors

While the exact cause of stomach cancer is not fully understood, several risk factors can increase your chances of developing it. They include:

- ageing – it is more common in people over 60 years
- gender – men are more likely to develop stomach cancer than women
- smoking tobacco significantly raises the risk
- frequent alcohol use
- diet – eating a lot of processed meat, or salted or pickled foods
- *Helicobacter pylori* infection – these bacteria can cause stomach ulcers and are linked to stomach cancer
- family history – if close family members have had stomach cancer, your risk may be higher
- previous stomach surgery – surgery for other conditions can increase risk
- certain medical conditions – gastric polyps, pernicious anaemia and chronic gastritis.

Diagnosis

If stomach cancer is suspected, your doctor may use several methods to confirm the diagnosis.

Physical exam and history

The doctor will check you for signs of disease, such as lumps, swelling or anything else that seems unusual. They will ask you about your medical history, family history and your health habits.

Blood tests

You will have blood tests as part of the initial set of tests and during ongoing checks.

Endoscopy and biopsy

An endoscope is a thin, flexible tube with a small camera on the end. It is inserted down your throat and into the stomach to look for abnormal areas. The doctor may also take a biopsy (a small sample) of stomach tissue during the procedure. The biopsy will be sent to a pathologist to look for signs of cancer.

Computed tomography (CT) scan

A CT scan uses X-rays to build a 3-dimensional picture of your stomach and the organs around it.

Positron emission tomography (PET)

During a PET scan, a small amount of radioactive dye is injected into a vein. This scan can pick up very small areas of active cells.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

An MRI scan uses magnets and radio waves to build a detailed cross-sectional picture of the stomach and surrounding areas.

Laparoscopy

This is a small operation done under general anaesthetic. A long tube with a camera at one end (a laparoscope) is inserted through a small cut in your abdomen to check whether the cancer has spread.

Staging

Once diagnosed, you may have further tests to determine how far the cancer has spread. This is called staging, and your doctors will use the results to advise on treatment.

The table outlines staging for stomach cancer.

Stage	Where cancer is found
1	Early stage. Cancer is found only in the lining of the stomach.
2 and 3	Cancer has spread deeper into the layers of the stomach wall, and to nearby lymph nodes.
4	Cancer has spread to other parts of the body. This is known as 'advanced cancer'.



Treatment

Treatment for stomach cancer depends on the stage of the cancer and your overall health. Options include the following.

Surgery

The most common surgical treatments are:

- **Endoscopic resection** – If the stomach cancer is small and has not spread, the surgeon may be able to remove the tumour through endoscopy.
- **Partial gastrectomy** – If the stomach cancer is at the lower part of your stomach, you may have surgery to remove that part of the stomach.
- **Total gastrectomy** – This is surgery to remove all your stomach. After your stomach is removed, the surgeon will attach your oesophagus to your small intestine. Part of the small intestine will serve as a stomach.

Radiation therapy

Radiation therapy uses high-energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells. It can be used alone or in combination with other treatments.

Chemotherapy

Drugs are used to kill cancer cells or stop their growth. This can be done before surgery to shrink tumours or after surgery to destroy any remaining cancer cells. Chemotherapy is usually given through a drip into the veins (intravenously) at a hospital or cancer clinic. It is often the main treatment for advanced cancer.

Immunotherapy

This treatment helps your immune system fight the cancer more effectively. Immunotherapy has been shown to work well with chemotherapy for certain types of stomach cancer.

Targeted therapy

These drugs target specific characteristics of cancer cells. For example, some may target specific genetic mutations found in certain tumours.

Clinical trials

Clinical trials allow new treatments to be tested and offer access to potentially more effective therapies than otherwise available.

Ask your doctor if there is a trial that could work for you.

Living with stomach cancer

A diagnosis of stomach cancer can be overwhelming. Here are some tips for coping.

Stay informed

Learn about your condition and treatment options. Knowledge can empower you.

Nutritional support

Engage with a dietitian, who can help with diet-related side effects and maintaining weight. Many people find that relieving dietary-related symptoms makes the biggest difference to how they feel.

Physical wellbeing

You will feel physical effects from the cancer and its treatment.

Physical activity can help with symptoms. The amount you can tolerate will depend on how you feel and whether you are having treatment or recovering from it.

An exercise physiologist or physiotherapist can assist you in staying active.

Emotional wellbeing

Seek support, talk to friends, family, or attend support groups. A cancer counselling service can support you and provide different strategies to help you cope. Simple relaxation techniques can help such as deep breathing or listening to soothing music – both are easy things to do at home.

Practical support

Accept offers of help and ask for help if you need it.

It is important to deal with work or financial situations so that they don't become an extra source of stress.

Talk to your employer about taking sick leave, reducing your hours or working from home. Ask about any financial help or benefits you may be entitled to.

Reducing risk

While there is no guaranteed way to prevent stomach cancer, some lifestyle choices may help reduce risk:

- maintaining a healthy weight – aim for a balanced diet and regular exercise
- eating a healthy diet – include plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and limit processed foods
- having regular check-ups – if you have risk factors, talk to your doctor about monitoring and preventive measures
- managing acid reflux – if you have chronic acid reflux, talk to your doctor about management options
- limiting alcohol – reducing alcohol consumption can lower risk
- quitting smoking – if you smoke, seek help to stop.