



UNITED GASTROENTEROLOGISTS

Patient Education Sheet

What is a hiatal hernia

A hiatal hernia is what doctors call it when a part of the stomach moves up into the chest area. Normally, the stomach sits below the diaphragm, the layer of muscle that separates the organs in the chest from the organs in the belly. The esophagus, the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach, passes through a hole in the diaphragm. In people with a hiatal hernia, the stomach pushes up through that hole, too.

There are 2 types of hiatal hernia:

- Sliding hernia — A sliding hernia happens when the top of the stomach squeezes up into the space above the diaphragm. This is the most common type of hiatal hernia.
- Paraesophageal hernia — A paraesophageal hernia happens when the top of the stomach folds up against the esophagus, creating a pouch. This is not very common, but it can be serious. If left untreated, this type of hernia can damage the top of the stomach.

What are the symptoms of a hiatal hernia? — Hiatal hernias do not usually cause symptoms. In some cases, though, hiatal hernias cause stomach acid to leak into the esophagus. This is called acid reflux or gastroesophageal reflux, and it can cause symptoms, including:

- Burning in the chest, known as heartburn
- Burning in the throat or an acid taste in the throat
- Stomach or chest pain
- Trouble swallowing
- A raspy voice or a sore throat
- Unexplained cough

Is there a test for hiatal hernia? — Yes, but doctors do not usually test for hiatal hernia. Instead, most people learn they have a hiatal hernia when they are having tests to find the cause of symptoms, or for other reasons. For instance, some people find out they have a hiatal hernia when they have an X-ray. Others find out when their doctor puts a tube with a tiny camera down their throat (called an endoscopy).

How are hiatal hernias treated? — The hiatal hernia itself is not usually treated. But people who have symptoms caused by a hiatal hernia can get treated for their symptoms.

Treatment for symptoms involves taking the medicines that are used for acid reflux. If those treatments do not work, doctors sometimes will do surgery to pull the stomach back down and repair the hole in the diaphragm so the stomach does not slide up again.

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