

OESOPHAGEAL CANCER FACT SHEET

What is Oesophageal Cancer?

Oesophageal cancer is a cancer that develops in the oesophagus (food pipe), the tube that carries food and liquids from the mouth to the stomach. It can affect swallowing and nutrition. Early detection improves the chance of successful treatment.

Oesophageal Cancer in Sri Lanka and Worldwide

According to the National Cancer Control Programme of Sri Lanka, oesophageal cancer affects both men and women, but it is more common in men.

Sri Lankan data from recent NCCP incidence and mortality reports of 2022 show:

More than 1,900 newly diagnosed Oesophageal cancer patients were reported. More than 600 deaths were reported from Oesophageal cancer in 2020.

- Higher incidence among males compared with females
- Increasing risk with older age
- Significant health burden due to late diagnosis

Worldwide, oesophagus cancer is among the leading causes of cancer-related deaths. It is more common in Asia and some African countries. Tobacco use, alcohol use, an unhealthy diet, and long-term acid reflux increase the risk.

Male and Female Differences

- Oesophageal cancer is more common in men than women.
- Men have higher rates of tobacco and alcohol use, which increase risk.
- Women can also develop oesophagus cancer, especially with long-standing acid reflux, obesity, or poor diet
- Both men and women should seek medical attention early if symptoms appear.

Risk Factors

- Smoking and tobacco chewing
- Alcohol consumption
- Long-term acid reflux (GERD)
- Barrett's oesophagus
- Eating very hot foods and drinks regularly
- Poor diet low in fruits and vegetables
- Obesity
- Increasing age
- Exposure to certain chemicals
- Family history of oesophageal cancer



Prevention

Healthy lifestyle choices can help reduce risk:

- Avoid smoking and tobacco products
- Limit or avoid alcohol
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Seek treatment for long-term acid reflux
- Avoid extremely hot drinks and foods
- Exercise regularly

Early Detection

There is no national screening programme for oesophageal cancer in Sri Lanka.

Early medical attention is important, especially for people with:

- Persistent swallowing difficulty
- Long-term acid reflux symptoms
- Unexplained weight loss
- Persistent vomiting or chest discomfort

Doctors may arrange further tests if symptoms continue.

Signs and Symptoms

Possible warning signs include:

- Difficulty swallowing
- Pain when swallowing
- Food getting stuck in the throat or chest
- Unexplained weight loss
- Persistent indigestion or heartburn
- Vomiting
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Chronic cough or hoarseness
- Loss of appetite

Diagnosis

- Medical history and physical examination
- Endoscopy (camera test of the food pipe)
- Biopsy to confirm cancer
- CT scan or MRI
- PET scan in selected patients



Treatment

Treatment depends on the stage of cancer and the patient's overall health.

Treatment options may include:

- Surgery
- Radiotherapy
- Chemotherapy
- Combined chemoradiation
- Targeted therapy or immunotherapy in selected patients
- Nutritional support
- Palliative care for symptom relief and quality of life

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation supports recovery and daily functioning after treatment.

Services may include:

- Nutritional counselling
- Swallowing therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Psychological support
- Pain management
- Family and caregiver support

Palliative Care

Palliative care helps improve the quality of life for patients and families.

It may include:

- Pain relief
- Nutritional support
- Relief of swallowing difficulty
- Emotional and spiritual support
- Home-based care
- End-of-life care

Palliative care can be provided together with cancer treatment.

Survivorship

After treatment, regular follow-up care is important.

Survivorship care may include:

- Monitoring for recurrence
- Managing side effects
- Nutritional monitoring
- Mental health support
- Healthy lifestyle guidance
- Family and community support



Services Available in Sri Lanka

- Cancer Early Detection Centres
- Surgical Clinics in government hospitals.
- Cancer treatment centres including National Cancer Institute Sri Lanka (Apeksha Hospital).
- Palliative care clinics
- National Cancer Control Programme awareness and support services

When Should You Seek Medical Advice?

Seek medical advice immediately if you have:

- Difficulty swallowing lasting more than two weeks
- Unexplained weight loss
- Persistent vomiting
- Ongoing heartburn or indigestion
- Blood in vomit or black stools
- Chest discomfort with swallowing

Contact Details

Address: National Cancer Control Programme,
555/5, Public Health Complex, Elvitigala Mawatha,
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Cancer Early Detection Centre

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