



**NEGMC offering nonsurgical way to curb cancer
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For the first time, doctors in Gainesville have a nonsurgical way to cure a precancerous condition of the esophagus before it turns deadly.

In February, Northeast Georgia Medical Center began offering a treatment for Barrett's esophagus, an abnormal growth of the cell lining that can develop into cancer.

The condition is linked to chronic heartburn, also known as gastroesophageal reflux disease. In some patients, the cells of the esophagus begin to change after years of stomach acid regurgitation.

"In Barrett's, it seems like the body tries to make the lining of the esophagus more like the lining of the stomach," said Gainesville gastroenterologist **Charles Allen**. "It's an adaptation to the constant exposure to acid."

But while the body may think it's protecting itself, the opposite may be true.

In 10 percent of cases, Barrett's turns into a highly malignant adenocarcinoma that may require removing much of the esophagus.

Until about four years ago, the usual "treatment" for Barrett's was surveillance.

Every year or two, the physician would perform an endoscopy, snaking a flexible, lighted tube down the patient's throat to check for cancer.

Esophageal cancer

Incidence: About 14,550 new cases of esophageal cancer will be diagnosed in the United States this year, and 13,770 patients will die of the disease. The incidence among white males is increasing at about 2 percent per year.

Risk factors: Men are three times more likely than women to get esophageal cancer. Other risk factors include age older than 45, chronic heartburn, obesity and alcohol and tobacco use.

Symptoms: Usually the first sign of the disease is difficulty swallowing. By that time, the tumor is so large that it requires major surgery. Other symptoms may include chest pain and weight loss.

Prognosis: Because esophageal cancer is typically at an advanced stage when diagnosed, the five-year survival rate is about 15 percent.

Source: American Cancer Society

Now, in a 30-minute outpatient procedure, doctors can use ablation technology to "burn off" the abnormal cells characteristic of Barrett's. The carefully controlled heat energy removes a thin layer of diseased cells without harming healthy tissue.

Carla Reeves, manager of the endoscopy department at the medical center, said the Gainesville hospital is one of only four in Georgia that currently offer the procedure.

"We purchased the equipment specifically for this," she said. "It's available to any physician who is credentialed to perform endoscopies at our hospital and wants to become certified in the technique."

The innovation is timely, given that the incidence of esophageal cancer appears to be on the rise.

"We think it may be related to obesity, which increases your risk of having esophageal reflux," Allen said.

Only about 8 percent of people with chronic reflux will develop Barrett's. But since millions of Americans suffer from heartburn, there's still a significant pool of patients at risk for cancer.

"There are easily several hundred people in the Gainesville area who have been diagnosed with Barrett's, and probably many more who have not yet been identified," Allen said.

Most of those people could benefit from the procedure, which is covered by Medicare and major insurance plans.

Patients are able to return to work the next day, though they may have some discomfort and must eat a soft diet for a week.

Reeves believes that's a small price to pay for the chance to prevent esophageal cancer, which has a survival rate of only about 15 percent.

"I think it's wonderful that we can now address the problem and not have to wait (until cancer develops)," she said.