



# New Treatment Offers Hope for Chronic Heartburn Sufferers

**Doctors Optimistic About Device That Could Remove Precancerous Cells From Esophagus**

**Aug. 16, 2007 —**

Esophageal cancer kills 16,000 Americans each year, and the numbers are growing. The problem usually begins with chronic heartburn, which many people don't realize can turn into something more serious.

Now doctors are optimistic about a new device could remove damaged cells in the esophagus before they can grow cancerous.

Don Mitchell suffered heartburn or "acid reflux" for 20 years, never thinking about the health risks it posed -- until he saw what it did to his son, Todd Mitchell, who died at 32 of cancer of the esophagus.

"He had the same symptoms I had," Mitchell said. "You have the reflux at night while you're trying to sleep. You have the indigestion after every meal. These are the same things Todd had."

Americans spend more than \$8 billion a year trying to ease the pain, but pills may not be enough to prevent serious damage to the esophagus.

"If they have symptoms for more than five years then we get very, very concerned that they have changed their lining of the esophagus," Dr. Bill Richards, of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, said. "It's something like a burn that you might get from having hydrochloric acid poured on your hand."

Doctors are looking at a new device that may remove those damaged cells before they turn into cancer. With the patient sedated, doctors thread a camera and metal mesh down the throat and into the esophagus.

Once it's in the right position, doctors inflate the device and burn away the damaged cells using radio frequency waves, explained Dr. Charles Lightdale of New York Presbyterian Hospital.

That's a hopeful piece of news for those who suffer from chronic heartburn.

"It's a load off your mind, especially knowing the suffering that my son went through with this disease," Don Mitchell said. "It's a lot of relief knowing you don't have to go through the pain."

## **Dr. Tim Breaks It Down**

The statistics on cancer of the esophagus are really frightening. Once you get it, you have only a 16 percent chance of surviving five years.

Heartburn or reflux, which means stomach acids that backs up into esophagus, is common. We tend to make light of it in all those commercials, but in fact, up to 10 percent of people with serious heartburn or reflux will go on to develop a precancerous condition called Barrett's esophagus, said ABC News medical editor Dr. Tim Johnson.

His advice:

- See a gastroenterologist if you have serious heartburn attacks more than three times a week.
- Medication can control heartburn, but that doesn't mean that you are safe from a precancerous condition.
- If you are diagnosed with Barrett's esophagus, you have to follow your doctor's guidelines about regular exams to detect further cell changes and treatment with anti-acid medications.

Doctors are cautiously optimistic about the new treatment, which uses radiofrequency waves that are more focused than previous treatments using lasers, chemicals and surgery.

Will this technique ultimately decrease the cancer rate? It's too early to say, but it's certainly a much more precise treatment than we've had previously. So I do think, with further study, this is going to become an important development," Johnson said.

Copyright © 2009 ABC News Internet Ventures