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Procedure Removes Cells To Prevent Esophageal Cancer

Acid Reflux Could Lead To Precancerous Cells

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DENVER -- After a trip to the emergency room in 2008, Angela Helmke was shocked to learn that her chronic acid reflux had led to a serious condition called Barrett's Esophagus.

"I was vomiting profusely, blood coming up and out both ends, and became very, very weak," said Helmke.

She is one of approximately 19 million Americans who suffer from acid reflux; but there is a greater concern.

"Over time you can injure the esophagus to the point that it's not just inflammation it is actually precancerous cells beginning to develop," said Dr. Aaron Burrows, a gastroenterologist at Rose Medical Center.

There is a 10-20 percent chance that those precancerous cells will progress to esophageal cancer. But now doctors at Rose Medical Center are using the non-surgical HALO Procedure to remove the abnormal cells before that can happen.

The HALO catheter is a small probe that is inserted through the mouth, and positioned in the esophagus using an endoscope. The catheter kills abnormal cells by evaporating the water they contain, with a one-second dose of radio frequency.

The effect is similar to mild sunburn, where the skin peels off and healthy tissue regenerates the area.

"I've done several patients, where they come back and after one treatment, 80 percent of their Barrett's Esophagus is gone," said Burrows.

For most patients with Barrett's Esophagus, the HALO Procedure eliminates the need to surgically remove the esophagus, and the data collected since the procedure first became available in 2005 is very promising.

"To date 40,000 people have had this procedure done in the United States, and we find that 95 percent of people with mild dysplasia or pre-cancerous cells have complete eradication," said Burrows.

The result is long-lasting, and the side effects are mild, including temporary discomfort when swallowing.

After three treatments, Burrows has given Angela the "all-clear" and peace of mind.

"Had I not found this, and got rid of it, I could be walking with full-fledged esophagus cancer and not know it," she said.

Now that Angela's treatment is finished, she will return every two years for follow-up exams to see if the pre-cancerous cells return.

The HALO Procedure costs a few thousand dollars for each treatment, and is typically covered by insurance.

Additional Resources:

- Learn more about the procedure at RoseMed.com.

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