

Digestive Health Center

Hiatal Hernia

What is a hiatal hernia?

A hiatal hernia occurs when part of your stomach bulges upward out of your belly and into your chest cavity.

There are three main types of hiatal hernia: sliding, paraesophageal, and mixed. A sliding hiatal hernia is the most common type and is generally not a serious condition. Paraesophageal and mixed hiatal hernias may progress and are more serious but less common. The following discussion refers to sliding hiatal hernias.

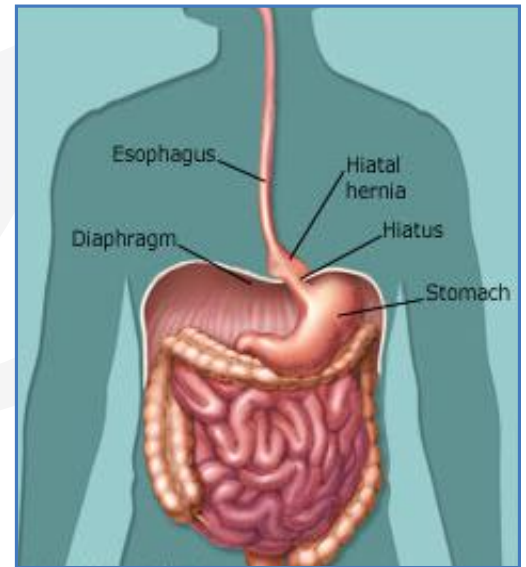
What causes a hiatal hernia?

The belly (abdomen) and chest are separated by a sheet-like muscle called the diaphragm. The esophagus, the muscular tube that connects the throat to the stomach, passes through an opening in the diaphragm called the hiatus to connect to the stomach.

A hiatal hernia is often caused by weakened muscles and connective tissue within and around the hiatus. In a sliding hiatal hernia, a small portion of the stomach pushes upward through the diaphragm at the hiatus and becomes positioned above the abdomen, inside the chest cavity. Most of the time, the cause is not known. Some people develop a hiatal hernia after sustaining an injury to that area of the body; others are born with a weakness or an especially large hiatus. Some experts suspect that increased pressure in the abdomen from coughing, straining during bowel movements, pregnancy and delivery, or substantial weight gain may contribute to the development of a hiatal hernia. In addition, there is an increased occurrence in people over fifty and smokers.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who have a sliding hiatal hernia have no symptoms, and it is often diagnosed when a person is being evaluated for other health concerns. But if the lower esophageal sphincter slides up above the diaphragm, it may not close well, and stomach acid and juices may back up into the esophagus (acid reflux). This results in an uncomfortable feeling of burning, warmth, heat, or pain behind the breastbone (sternum) that may occur after eating, soon after lying down, or when bending forward, and it may come and go. You may also have a sour taste in your mouth. This group of symptoms is commonly known as heartburn or reflux.



If you have shortness of breath or pain in the area of your breastbone, you need to make sure it is not caused by a heart problem. The burning sensation caused by acid reflux usually occurs after eating. Pain from your heart is usually felt as pressure, heaviness, a weight, tightness, squeezing, discomfort, or a dull ache that occurs most often after activity. If you are not sure of the source of chest pain, seek medical attention immediately.

How is a hiatal hernia diagnosed?

A hiatal hernia is often diagnosed when you are being evaluated for another health concern. A sliding hiatal hernia by itself may not produce any symptoms, but it may lead to gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which does cause symptoms—mainly heartburn. Often a hiatal hernia is diagnosed when you visit a health professional for symptoms of GERD. A hiatal hernia can be diagnosed with a specialized X-ray study that allows visualization of the esophagus (barium swallow) or with endoscopy.

How is a hiatal hernia treated?

Treatment for mild symptoms begins with making lifestyle changes and, if needed, taking nonprescription antacids, acid reducers, or acid blockers. If symptoms are continual or severe, you may have GERD. Treatment for GERD usually requires stronger prescription medications. Surgery is sometimes needed.

