

# Digestive Health MATTERS

## HIGH-RISK HEARTBURN *Barrett's Esophagus*

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John F. Erkkinen, MD  
Portland Gastroenterology Center

**CHRONIC HEARTBURN** (also known as reflux disease or GERD) is an increasingly common problem. It is estimated that 7% of adult Americans experience daily episodes of heartburn and as many as 40% have symptoms at least monthly. While periodic heartburn might be relieved with antacids and lifestyle changes, chronic heartburn can cause a life-threatening condition called Barrett’s esophagus.

According to a recent AP story by medical writer Luran Neergaard, “Chronic heartburn appears to be fueling the nation’s fastest-growing cancer, esophageal cancer.” About 10% of heartburn sufferers, most over age 50, are at risk for Barrett’s esophagus. In these cases, severe heartburn over the course of many years changes the lining of the esophagus, making cancer more likely.

Although most patients with Barrett’s esophagus will never develop esophageal cancer, they are considered at least 30 times more likely to develop cancer than the average person. Their symptoms often include trouble swallowing and a loss of appetite. John F. Erkkinen, MD, of Portland Gastroenterology Center says, “Routine periodic endoscopy and biopsy are recommended for patients with Barrett’s esophagus to identify those at especially high risk for cancer. Surgery or other newer nonsurgical treatments may be recommended.”

For more information about Barrett’s esophagus and other aspects of digestive health, talk to your primary care provider or visit [www.portlandgastro.com](http://www.portlandgastro.com).



**Heartburn is caused by excessive exposure of the esophagus (the swallowing tube leading to the stomach) to stomach acids.**



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