Stomach cancer, also called gastric cancer, can occur in any part of the stomach. Cancer occurs when cells become abnormal and divide without control or order. These abnormal cells may then spread throughout the stomach and to other organs.

The stomach is part of the digestive system. It is located in the upper abdomen, under the ribs. The upper part of the stomach connects to the esophagus. The lower part leads into the small intestine.

When food enters the stomach, muscles in the stomach wall create a rippling motion that mixes and mashes the food. At the same time, juices made by glands in the lining of the stomach, help digest the food. After about 3 hours, the food becomes a liquid and moves into the small intestine, where digestion continues.

Risk Factors
The exact causes of cancer of the stomach are not known. These factors may increase the risk of developing cancer of the stomach:

- Stomach inflammation and ulcers - Inflammation and ulcers caused by the *H. pylori* bacteria may create a greater risk for stomach cancer.
- Stomach surgery - People who have had stomach surgery or who have lower than normal amounts of digestive juices have an increased risk of stomach cancer.
- Exposure - Exposure to certain kinds of dust and fume has been linked to a higher than average risk of stomach cancer.
- Smoking - Cigarette smoking may also increase the risk of stomach cancer.
Symptoms
Early stomach cancer often does not cause symptoms. As the cancer grows, symptoms may include:

- Indigestion or heartburn
- Bloating of the stomach after meals
- Pain or discomfort in the abdomen
- Nausea or vomiting
- Vomiting blood
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Bloody or dark tarry stools
- Weakness and fatigue

Diagnosis
The doctor will ask about your medical history, perform an exam, and order lab tests. Other tests that may help diagnose stomach cancer include:

Fecal Occult Blood Test
This test checks for hidden (occult) blood in the stool. Stomach cancer sometimes causes bleeding that cannot be seen. A small amount of stool is placed on a plastic slide or paper. The stool sample may be tested in the doctor’s office or may be sent to the lab.

Upper GI Series
This test involves taking X-rays of the esophagus and stomach. You will be given a thick, chalky barium liquid to drink. This liquid outlines the stomach on the X-rays to show tumors or other problems.

Endoscopy
A thin, lighted tube is passed through the mouth and esophagus to the stomach. You are given medication through an IV (intravenous) to relax you. Your throat may also be numbed. Through the tube, the doctor can look directly at the inside of the stomach. If an abnormal area is seen, the doctor can remove a sample of the tissue for further study (biopsy).
Methods of Treatment

Treatment for stomach cancer depends on a number of factors – size, location, extent of the tumor, and the patient’s health.

Surgery
Surgery called a gastrectomy is the most common treatment for stomach cancer. This surgery removes part or all of the stomach, as well as some of the tissue around the stomach. The rest of the stomach is reconnected to the esophagus or small intestine. If the entire stomach is removed, the esophagus is connected directly to the small intestine. Lymph nodes near the tumor are also removed during the surgery.

Chemotherapy
Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to destroy cancer cells. It may be used to improve comfort and manage pain and other problems caused by stomach cancer.

Radiation Therapy
Radiation therapy uses high-energy rays to destroy cancer cells. Radiation may also be used to improve comfort and manage pain and other problems.

Immunotherapy
This treatment can help the body’s immune system attack and destroy cancer cells. It may also help the body recover from some of the side effects of other treatments.

Nutrition
Eating well during cancer treatment means getting enough calories and protein to prevent or control weight loss, maintain strength, and promote healing. Common side effects of treatment, such as poor appetite, nausea, vomiting, dry mouth, or mouth sores, can make eating difficult. This is especially true with stomach cancer. Your health care provider can advise you on ways to maintain a healthy diet. If eating is not possible, liquid nutrition can be provided through a feeding tube placed directly into the intestines.

Follow-up Care
Follow-up care after treatment for cancer of the stomach is important in order to ensure that any changes in health are found early. If the cancer returns or progresses, or if a new cancer develops, it can be treated as soon as possible. You should report any health problems to your doctor as soon as they appear.