

Esophageal Varices

What Are Esophageal Varices?

Esophageal varices are abnormal, swollen blood vessels in the esophagus (the tube that connects the throat to the stomach). This condition occurs most often in people with serious liver diseases. Esophageal varices result when normal blood flow to the liver is interrupted. Instead, that blood flows into the smaller blood vessels that aren't designed to carry large volumes of blood causing them to swell and leak blood, or even rupture, causing life-threatening bleeding (hemorrhage).

Causes

Any kind of liver disease can cause esophageal varices. Cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, usually due to alcoholism, is the most common reason. Other reasons include:

- Severe heart failure: When the heart cannot pump blood around the body effectively enough, pressure may rise in the portal vein.
- A blood clot in the portal vein.
- Sarcoidosis. This is an inflammatory disease that can affect the liver.
- Schistosomiasis. A parasitic infection that can cause liver damage.

Symptoms

Symptoms may include:

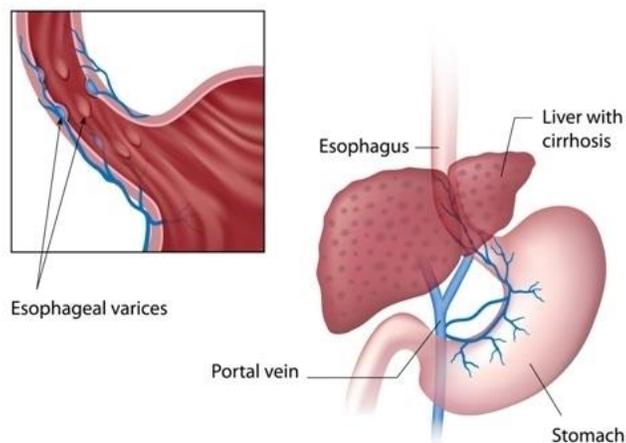
- Vomiting blood, or vomit that looks similar to coffee grounds;
- Black, tarry stools;
- Low blood pressure;
- Dizziness; or
- Loss of consciousness.

How Are Esophageal Varices Diagnosed?

Tests may include:

- An endoscopy procedure where a thin tube with a camera is inserted through the mouth into the esophagus so the varices can be inspected and evaluated to help determine the risk of bleeding.
- Imaging tests. CT scans and MRI scans can both show esophageal varices. However, they cannot predict the likelihood of bleeding.

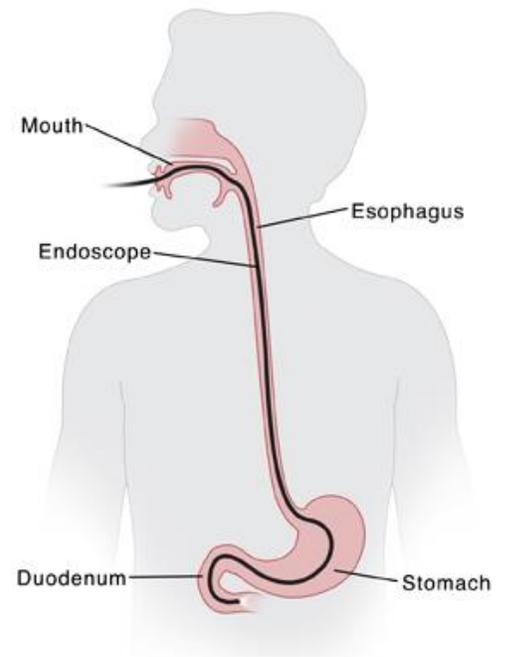
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How Are Esophageal Varices Treated?

There are different types of treatment used for esophageal varices. These include:

- Esophageal ligation. A tight band is placed around the esophageal varices. This applies pressure and constricts it, preventing bleeding.
- Injection therapy. The varices are injected with a solution that shrinks them and scars the veins closed.
- Medications, which may be prescribed to lower the blood pressure inside the enlarged veins. This reduces the risk of bleeding.
- Balloon tamponade. A tube with a balloon is guided down your esophagus and filled with air which puts pressure on enlarged or bleeding varices to control bleeding. This is a short term (temporary) way to control bleeding until other treatments are available.
- A liver transplant may be done as a last resort.



Home Care Instructions

- Take all medications exactly as directed.
- Follow any prescribed diet.
- Avoid alcohol if recommended.
- Follow instructions regarding both rest and physical activity.
- Seek treatment for any alcohol-related problems.

Seek Immediate Medical Care if:

- You vomit blood, or vomit that looks similar to coffee grounds;
- You pass black tarry stools, or bright red blood in the stools;
- You are dizzy, lightheaded, or faint;
- You are unable to eat or drink; or
- You experience chest pain.