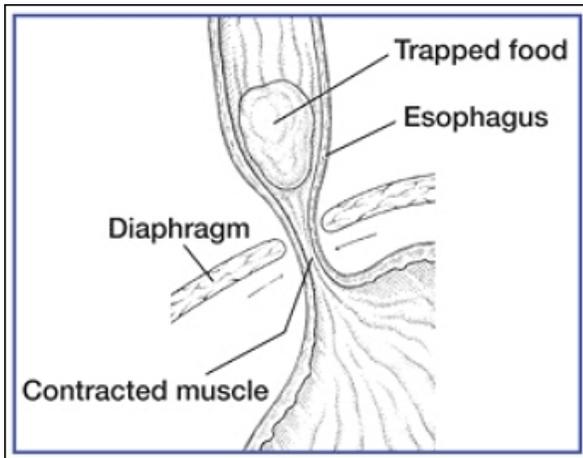


WHAT IS ACHALASIA?

Achalasia is an uncommon motility disorder of the esophagus (swallowing tube). It can cause difficulty in swallowing, regurgitation after meals, weight loss and chest pain. The exact cause of achalasia is unknown. It is a neurological problem of the esophagus, where the muscle at the end of the esophagus, the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), does not relax enough for food to pass properly. Hence, ingested foods get stuck in the esophagus.



How Do You Diagnose Achalasia?

Achalasia can be diagnosed only by esophageal manometry. However, tests such as upper endoscopy or an x-ray of the esophagus can suggest the diagnosis of achalasia.

What Are the Treatment Options for Achalasia?

Achalasia can be treated in several different ways. The correct therapy should select for each individual based on many factors, such as age, the severity of achalasia, co-existing medical problems, and availability of doctor's expertise for each therapy.

Medicines

Achalasia may be treated with certain medications, however the results are usually temporary if the patient responds at all. These medications include nitrates (nitroglycerine underneath the tongue) or calcium channel blockers.

Botox Injections

Botulinum toxin (Botox) can be used to inject directly into the lower esophageal sphincter muscle during upper endoscopy. The Botox paralyze the muscle so it will stop contracting, hence relaxing the muscle. This is a safe procedure and can be effective to many patients, especially older patients who are not good candidates for surgery. However, the benefits of Botox are usually temporary and may require further injections months later.

Endoscopic Balloon Dilation for Achalasia

The lower esophageal sphincter (LES) can be stretched with a balloon, usually 3 cm or 3.5 cm in diameter. This procedure can be performed through and upper endoscopy with surgery. It can be effective in up to 80% - 85% of patients. However, there is a risk of causing a tear in the esophagus requiring surgery to repair it.

Surgery (Heller Myotomy)

The lower esophagus muscle can be cut during an operation to cause relaxation of the lower esophageal sphincter. This can be an effective treatment for achalasia, especially those patients who are good surgical candidates. This surgery can now be performed using minimal invasive techniques to minimize pain and hospital stay.