



[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Esophageal spasm

URL of this page: [//medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000289.htm](https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000289.htm)

## Esophageal spasm

Esophageal spasms are abnormal contractions of the muscles in the esophagus, the tube that carries food from the mouth to the stomach. These spasms may not move food effectively to the stomach.

### Causes

The cause of esophageal spasm is unknown. Very hot or very cold foods may trigger spasms in some people. Muscle or nerve problems in the esophagus may cause the spasm.

### Symptoms

Symptoms may include:

- Problems swallowing or pain with swallowing
- Pain in the chest or upper abdomen

It can be hard to tell a spasm from angina pectoris, a symptom of heart disease. The pain may spread to the neck, jaw, arms, or back

### Exams and Tests

Tests you may need to look for the condition include:

- Esophagogastroduodenoscopy (EGD)
- Esophageal manometry
- Esophagogram (barium swallow x-ray)
- Heart evaluation if there is concern that the spasm sensation stems from heart disease

### Treatment

Nitroglycerin given under the tongue (sublingual) may help a sudden episode of esophageal spasm. Long-acting nitroglycerin and calcium channel blockers are also used for the problem.

Long-term (chronic) cases are sometimes treated with low-dose antidepressants such as trazodone or nortriptyline to reduce symptoms.

Occasionally, spasm may improve with medicines that block acid production.

Botulinum toxin injections may be done into the esophagus for some conditions that may cause esophageal spasm, such as achalasia, and for distal esophageal spasm.

Rarely, certain cases may need dilation (widening) of the esophagus by endoscopic myotomy (cutting the affected muscles in the esophagus). Surgery may be needed to control symptoms in the case of spastic achalasia.

## Outlook (Prognosis)

An esophageal spasm may come and go (intermittent) or last for a long time (chronic). Medicine can help relieve symptoms in many cases. However, other treatments may be needed, especially in the case of achalasia.

## Possible Complications

The condition may not respond to treatment.

## When to Contact a Medical Professional

Contact your health care provider if you have symptoms of esophageal spasm that don't go away. The symptoms may actually be due to heart problems. Your provider can help decide if you need heart tests.

## Prevention

Avoid very hot or very cold foods if you get esophageal spasms. If the spasm also causes trouble swallowing, avoiding difficult foods such as meat, dry breads, and rice may help.

## Alternative Names

Spasm of the esophagus; Distal esophageal spasm; Jackhammer esophagus; Achalasia

## References

Falk GW, Katzka DA. Diseases of the esophagus. In: Goldman L, Cooney KA, eds. *Goldman-Cecil Medicine*. 27th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2024:chap 124.

Pandolfino JE, Kahrilas PJ. Esophageal neuromuscular function and motility disorders. In: Feldman M, Friedman LS, Brandt LJ, eds. *Sleisenger and Fordtran's Gastrointestinal and Liver Disease*. 11th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2021:chap 44.

## Review Date 10/30/2024

Updated by: Jenifer K. Lehrer, MD, Gastroenterologist, Philadelphia, PA. Review provided by VeriMed Healthcare Network. Also reviewed by David C. Dugdale, MD, Medical Director, Brenda Conaway, Editorial Director, and the A.D.A.M. Editorial team.

[Learn how to cite this page](#)



A.D.A.M., Inc. is accredited by [URAC](http://www.urac.org), for Health Content Provider ([www.urac.org](http://www.urac.org)). URAC's [accreditation program](#) is an independent audit to verify that A.D.A.M. follows rigorous standards of quality and accountability. A.D.A.M. is among the first to achieve this important distinction for online health information and services. Learn more about A.D.A.M.'s [editorial policy](#), [editorial process](#), and [privacy policy](#).

The information provided herein should not be used during any medical emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. A licensed medical professional should be consulted for diagnosis and treatment of any and all medical conditions. Links to other sites are provided for information only – they do not constitute endorsements of those other sites. No warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied, is made as to the accuracy, reliability, timeliness, or correctness of any translations made by a third-party service of the information provided herein into any other language. © 1997-2025 A.D.A.M., a business unit of Ebix, Inc. Any duplication or distribution of the information contained herein is strictly prohibited.



---

National Library of Medicine 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
National Institutes of Health