DIGESTIVE HEALTH CENTER
AT NORTHWESTERN MEDICINE
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The Esophageal Center in the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology represents the fruition of more than two decades of expertise in esophagology at Northwestern. Officially established in 2009, the center is the largest referral point in the Midwest for esophageal function testing. Peers from around the world come to our center to learn from our practices. Our center was founded by Peter Kahrilas, MD, Gilbert H. Marquardt Professor of Medicine and is currently being directed by Dr. Ikuo Hirano, a national expert on eosinophilic esophagitis and esophageal motility. The center also is supported by the Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology and its division chief, John Pandolfino, MD, Hans Popper Professor of Medicine, who was the first medical director of the center. We believe that we offer the key elements needed for ongoing clinical excellence and technical innovation: thoughtful clinicians, sophisticated diagnostic testing, clinical research, and state-of-the-art surgical practices.

Conditions diagnosed and treated at the Esophageal Center include:

- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), a condition in which the stomach contents (food or liquid) leak backwards from the stomach into the esophagus.
- Eosinophilic esophagitis, a primary allergic disease that causes problems with swallowing.
- Benign and malignant growths of the esophagus, including esophageal cancer.
- Hiatal hernia, a condition in which a portion of the stomach protrudes upward into the chest through an opening in the diaphragm.
- Achalasia, a disease of the muscle of the esophagus.
- Barrett’s esophagus, a disorder in which the lining of the esophagus is damaged by stomach acid.
- Esophageal cysts.
- Esophageal diverticula, which are weak parts of the esophagus that form small pouches or sacs.

Disorders of the Esophagus: Complex and Challenging

Disorders of the esophagus span a wide spectrum of diseases from GERD, to motility disorders such as achalasia, to esophageal cancer. The prognosis and treatment of these disorders vary considerably, from medical treatment in uncomplicated GERD to esophagectomy in esophageal cancer. At Northwestern, our primary objectives are to improve quality of life by helping patients eat comfortably and preventing life-threatening complications such as aspiration pneumonia, or the development of esophageal cancer. GERD, the most common of the esophageal diseases, affects an estimated 20 percent of Americans. In recent years, healthcare professionals have become increasingly concerned about this condition due to its prevalence and impact on the community. This heightened focus can be attributed to several factors: GERD is a common problem with potentially serious medical complications, and the medical expense involved in the diagnosis, treatment, and management of the disease is significant. Additionally, GERD can be a risk factor for esophageal cancer.

“Our physicians and surgeons at the Esophageal Center are highly experienced, internationally recognized experts who have authored many of the current published guidelines for the treatment and management of GERD, swallowing disorders, eosinophilic esophagitis, and esophageal motility disorders that are utilized around the world to guide patient management.”

Peter Kahrilas, MD, Gilbert H. Marquardt Professor of Medicine and Founder of the Esophageal Center
The incidence of esophageal cancer has steadily increased over the past 30 years. According to estimates by the American Cancer Society, in 2013 there were a total of 17,990 new cases of esophageal cancer and 15,210 deaths. In addition to GERD, other noncancerous esophageal conditions, such as Barrett’s esophagus and achalasia, are risk factors for later development of esophageal cancer. In general, the prognosis of esophageal cancer is quite poor, due to the fact that most patients present with advanced disease. By the time the first symptoms are apparent, the cancer has already progressed. The overall five-year survival rate is approximately 15 percent, with most patients dying within the first year of diagnosis.

For these reasons, treating esophageal diseases of all types requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates excellence in research and education with cross-disciplinary patient care. The Esophageal Center at Northwestern anchors Northwestern’s expertise in the field. We proudly serve as the top national referral center for esophageal function testing and esophageal motility disorders. As we continue to grow and build our center, our goal is to successfully treat increasing numbers of patients, continue to conduct novel research, and participate in the education of our colleagues and the community.

All Components of Academic Medicine Are Represented at the Center

At the Esophageal Center, our physicians and surgeons are internationally recognized experts, having authored many of the current guidelines for the treatment and management of GERD, swallowing disorders, eosinophilic esophagitis, and other conditions. Eosinophilic esophagitis research is led by Nirmala Gonsalves, MD. Additionally, our investigators have pioneered the most modern diagnostic techniques and therapies, including wireless pH monitoring, high resolution manometry, and natural orifice transluminal endoscopic surgery.

Our comprehensive esophageal surgery program of excellence within the center, led by Nathaniel Soper, MD, and Eric Hungness, MD, has extensive experience in the approaches used to treat disorders of the esophagus, including minimally invasive surgery, trans-hiatal and trans-thoracic resection of the esophagus, partial and complete fundoplication for reflux disease, lengthening procedures for complex esophageal repairs, and trans-oral stapling (without an incision) of Zenker’s diverticulum. In addition, we offer nonsurgical therapies such as radiofrequency ablation, photodynamic therapy, laser, and stenting to appropriate patients.

Each team member at the Esophageal Center knows that delivering the highest level of patient care requires expert diagnostic skills, the ability to manage complex conditions, stellar communication skills, and a commitment to providing streamlined access to medical care. Our specialists from the fields of gastroenterology, general surgery, thoracic surgery (led by Malcolm DeCamp, MD, and anchored by Alberto de Hoyos, MD, and Shari Lynn Meyerson, MD), otolaryngology, clinical psychology, speech language pathology, and nutrition work together to implement effective and supportive plans for patients. The shared goal is to incorporate expert diagnosis and management with lifestyle modification, while paying careful attention to each patient’s emotional well-being. This approach promotes enhanced healthcare as well as effective communication between our clinicians, patients, and referring physicians.

The Esophageal Center has a unique collaboration with the GI Behavioral Medicine team at Northwestern. This is a vital component of our management strategy for treating esophageal symptoms with non-invasive interventions, such as dietary intervention, cognitive behavioral therapy, and hypnosis. The GI Behavioral Medicine team provides a multidisciplinary approach to treating esophageal symptoms that focuses on the brain-gut interaction.
Patient Care
Advanced diagnostic testing and therapeutics characterize the medical care experienced by each patient at the center. All levels of diagnostic support for esophageal conditions are available. The center provides minimally invasive options when surgical intervention is warranted. Comprehensive treatment programs include nutritional therapy, hypnotherapy, and a monthly support group for patients who are recovering from surgeries and treatments. For every patient, we concentrate on delivering the compassionate personal interaction that is required for dealing with significant changes in quality of life.

Research
The center initiates and participates in novel research into the pathogenesis and management of esophageal motor diseases, GERD, Barrett’s esophagus and other conditions. This helps to keep our program at the forefront of advances in esophagology. Currently, the center is conducting two large National Institutes of Health-funded grants to study GERD and swallowing disorders. Investigators at the center also have designed and implemented projects to refine esophageal function testing and to develop novel disease management strategies using interventional GI techniques.

Education
The Esophageal Center has built an international reputation as a training center for future esophagologists. Currently, the Esophageal Center supports the training of two international scholars per year. The international scholars apply for the positions and spend 12 to 24 months learning how to perform sophisticated clinical studies and participating in physiological research. The center also supports programs that allow outside Gastroenterology and Surgery fellows to rotate through one-month preceptorships that enhance their skills beyond what is available at their home institutions. Additionally, the motility technicians at the center train a significant number of technicians and nurses from other institutions by providing one-week tutorials on esophageal function testing. These activities are considered to be a high priority for the center and are helpful in promoting a high level of clinical practice in esophagology both nationally and internationally.

Front cover: This image is an example of Jackhammer Esophagus, a disease that was discovered at the Esophageal Center at Northwestern Medicine. Our group has been instrumental in developing the Chicago Classification of esophageal motor diseases, and we currently serve as an international referral center for these problems.

THROUGH NORTHWESTERN MEDICINE, WE ARE CREATING A NATIONAL EPICENTER FOR HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, RESEARCH, COMMUNITY SERVICE, AND ADVOCACY.

Northwestern Medicine
Northwestern Memorial HealthCare and Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine are seeking to impact the health of humankind through Northwestern Medicine. We aspire to be the destination of choice for people seeking quality healthcare; for those who provide, support, and advance that care through leading-edge treatments and breakthrough discoveries; and for people who share our passion for educating future physicians and scientists. Our commitment to transform healthcare and to be among the nation’s top academic medical centers will be accomplished through innovation and excellence.

The Esophageal Center within the Division of Gastroenterology is successfully combining multispecialty clinical care with groundbreaking research—all with a goal to bring forth results that focus on and best serve people with disorders of the esophagus. We invite interested friends to join us by providing philanthropic support that advances the studies of our exceptional clinician-scientists and basic investigators, as well as supports state-of-the-art esophageal care and the training of our next generation of experts.