

### Definition

A hernia is a protrusion of an organ through a wall of the cavity in which it is enclosed. In the case of a hiatal hernia (see figure 1b), a portion of the stomach protrudes through a tear-drop shaped hole in the esophagus and the stomach join.

### What Causes Hiatal Hernia?

The most frequent known cause of hiatal hernia is an increased pressure in the abdominal cavity produced by coughing, vomiting, straining at stool, or sudden physical exertion. Pregnancy, obesity, or excess fluid in the abdomen also contribute to causing this condition.

### Who Gets Hiatal Hernia?

Hiatal hernias may develop in people of all ages and both sexes, although it is considered to be a condition of middle age. In fact, the majority of otherwise healthy people past the age of 50 have a small hiatal hernias.

### Are There Any Complications Associated With Hiatal Hernias?

Most hiatal hernias do not need treatment. However, if the hernia is in danger of becoming strangulated (constricted in such a way as to cut off the blood supply) or is complicated by esophagitis (inflammation of the esophagus), treatment becomes necessary. To prevent strangulation, your doctor may perform surgery to reduce the size of the hernia.

Treatment of esophagitis is necessary to prevent ulcers (sores) from forming in the lining of the esophagus. When these sores heal, they can leave scars that can make it difficult or impossible to swallow. In some people, long-term esophagitis may result in Barrett's esophagus, a condition thought to be a precursor of cancer.

Most cases of esophagitis respond to antacids, weight reduction, and a common sense approach to eating, drinking and other lifestyle habits. Remember, if prolonged use of antacids becomes necessary, see your doctor. Long-term use of antacids can produce side effects like diarrhea, altered calcium metabolism, and magnesium retention.

If the esophagitis persists, your doctor may perform surgery to restore the stomach to its proper position and strengthen the area around the opening.

### Additional Readings

*Heartburn.* National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, 1986. Box NDDIC, 9000 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20892. (301) 468-6344. General information fact sheet.

Ellis FH Jr. Diaphragmatic hiatal hernias: recognizing and treating the major types. *Postgraduate Medicine*, 1990; 88(1): 113-24. General review article written for physicians.

Larson DE. Editor-in-Chief. *Mayo Clinic Family Health Book.* New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990. General medical guide with sections on esophageal problems, including hiatal hernia. Widely available in libraries and bookstores.

Tapley DS, et al., eds. *Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons Complete Home Medical Guide*, revised edition. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1990. General medical guide with sections on disorders of the esophagus, including hiatal hernia. Widely available in libraries and bookstores.

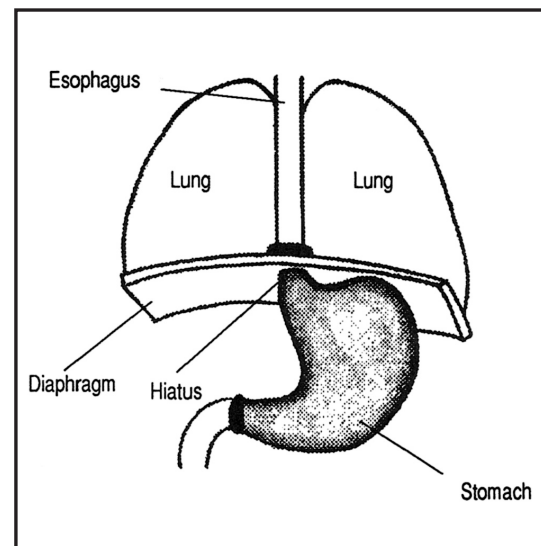


Figure 1a. Normal State

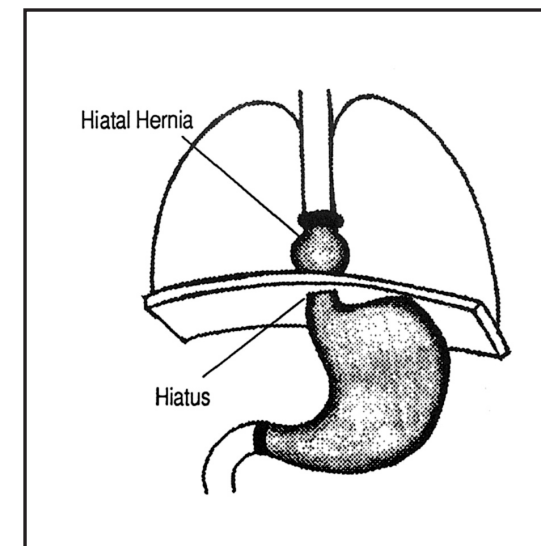


Figure 1b. Hiatal Hernia