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GASTROENTEROLOGY AND HEPATOLOGY

ESOPHAGEAL (SCHATZKI) RING

A lower esophageal (Schatzki's) ring is a "flap" of circumferential tissue at the junction of the esophagus and stomach, causing a narrowing of the opening or "lumen" of the lower esophagus. This results in food getting temporarily caught or "stuck" at that point. Spasm of the esophageal muscle may result and this may be quite painful. Food generally passes in seconds to minutes but may take up to 20 to 30 minutes or more. During this time, not only may there be pain, but liquids and saliva may not pass and may be brought up. Efforts to have this bolus pass may include The swallowing of carbonated beverages acts like a piston in the esophagus which may result in the bolus passing through into the stomach, though vomiting may result.

The sticking of food or "dysphagia" with a lower esophageal ring is typically intermittent, as the narrowing tends to come and go. This can even be seen endoscopically as one may observe the ring to appear and then disappear with respiratory and esophageal peristaltic motions.

The cause is unknown but it is thought that gastroesophageal acid reflux may be an important factor. Chronic use of acid stopping medications including "proton pump inhibitors" such as Prilosec, Omeprazole, Prevacid, Nexium, Aciphex and Protonix may prevent recurrence.

The natural history of this abnormality is to slowly but progressively worsen such that the sticking of food may occur more frequently and for longer periods of time. On a rare occasion, a food bolus may become "stuck," may not spontaneously pass, and patients may come to the emergency room and require emergency endoscopy to relieve the obstruction of the food bolus.

When the sticking of food becomes frequent and/or bothersome, treatment with endoscopic esophageal dilation with breaking of the ring is indicated. This procedure is relatively safe, though there is always a small risk of perforation when one dilates the esophagus. The procedure takes about the same amount of time as a diagnostic upper gastrointestinal endoscopy and there is typically no pain or other discomfort after the procedure. Symptoms of recurrent dysphagia may occur months to years after dilation, and the average "dilation-free interval" is about four years.