

## **Esophagus damage, cancer rising with long-term heartburn**

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Chronic heartburn is a daily acid bath for the esophagus, and complications from it are on the rise.

New government figures show a worrisome increase in esophagus disorders from severe acid reflux. The worst one, esophageal cancer, is continuing its march as the nation's fastest-growing malignancy.

What to do if you're one of the estimated 3 million Americans whose eroded esophagus means high risk for this especially deadly cancer? More doctors are trying to zap away the worst damage, beaming radiofrequency energy down the throat to burn off precancerous cells.

While it's not yet certain that will block cancer from ever forming, the studies are promising enough that specialists have begun debating how to better find at-risk patients, people who suffer a condition called Barrett's esophagus. Ironically, a damaged esophagus may no longer feel the burn of acid reflux, keeping sufferers in the dark.

"You become desensitized. You can go a long time without knowing you have Barrett's," warns Dr. John I. Allen of the American Gastroenterological Association.

Heartburn sometimes is a temporary problem, but it also can signal gastrointestinal reflux disease, or GERD, where a loose valve allows stomach acid to regularly back up into the delicate esophagus. Millions have GERD, which is on the rise along with expanding waistlines. For most people, acid-suppressing medications are the answer.