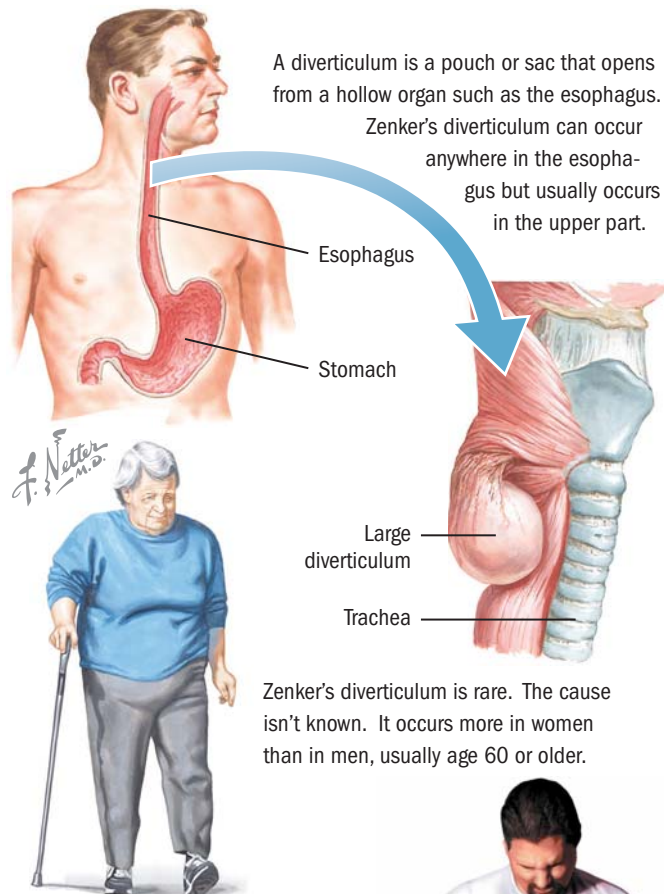


# MANAGING YOUR ZENKER'S DIVERTICULUM



A diverticulum is a pouch or sac that opens from a hollow organ such as the esophagus. Zenker's diverticulum can occur anywhere in the esophagus but usually occurs in the upper part.

Esophagus  
Stomach

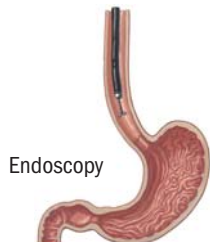
Large diverticulum  
Trachea

Zenker's diverticulum is rare. The cause isn't known. It occurs more in women than in men, usually age 60 or older.

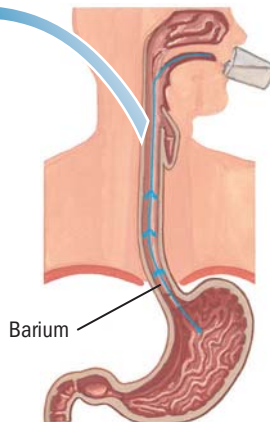
The most common complaint is trouble swallowing. Coughing, weight loss, fullness in the neck, and spitting up undigested food are others.



Barium swallow x-ray



Endoscopy



Barium

Your doctor makes a diagnosis by taking a medical history and ordering a barium swallow, a kind of x-ray. Endoscopy may also be done.

## What Is Zenker's Diverticulum?

A diverticulum is a pouch or sac that opens from a hollow organ such as the esophagus. The esophagus is the tube connecting the mouth with the stomach. Zenker's diverticulum can occur anywhere in the esophagus but is usually found in the upper part. The lining of the esophagus pushes backward, so some food stays in the pouch rather than moving down into the stomach.

Zenker's diverticulum is rare, occurring in less than 0.01% of the population. It's found more often in women than in men, usually those 60 years old or more.

This disorder can be associated with hiatal hernias, esophageal spasm, gastroesophageal reflux disease, and, rarely, cancer of the esophagus.

## What Causes Zenker's Diverticulum?

The cause is unknown, but it may result from increased pressure in the esophagus. This pressure may occur if the esophagus doesn't relax completely when food is swallowed. The pressure leads to a tear or break (herniation) in muscle tissues lining the esophagus. The result is a diverticulum. Zenker's diverticulum isn't passed from parents to children and isn't contagious.

## What Are the Symptoms of Zenker's Diverticulum?

The most common complaint is trouble swallowing (called dysphagia) solids and liquids. Coughing, bad breath (halitosis), weight loss, fullness in the neck, and spitting up undigested food are others.

An untreated diverticulum becomes larger and can lead to complications. These include food getting into lungs (aspiration), shortness of breath, fever, and pneumonia.



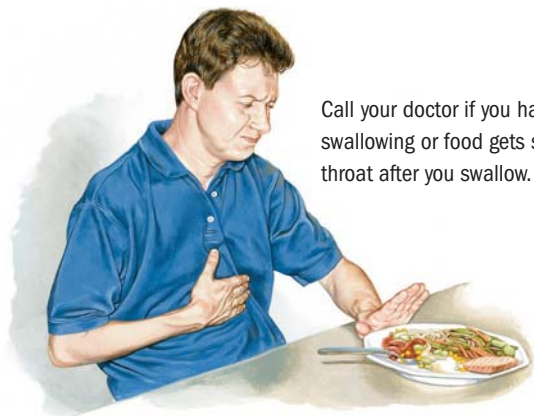
If you have symptoms, you will likely need surgery. If you have no symptoms and a small diverticulum (less than ¼ inch), your doctor may wait for symptoms to occur before doing surgery.



No drugs can get rid of the diverticulum. However, your doctor may prescribe medicines for heartburn, acid indigestion, or pneumonia from aspiration.



If treatment is conservative, you should eat soft foods (e.g., mashed potatoes, eggs, custards) that can be easily chewed and swallowed. Don't eat seeds, skins, or nuts.



Call your doctor if you have problems swallowing or food gets stuck in your throat after you swallow.

## FROM THE DESK OF

### NOTES

## How Is Zenker's Diverticulum Diagnosed?

The doctor makes a diagnosis by taking a medical history and ordering a barium swallow. In this test, barium contrast material is swallowed and x-rays are taken to get pictures of the esophagus.

The doctor may suggest seeing a gastroenterologist (doctor specializing in disorders of the esophagus, stomach, and intestines). The gastroenterologist may want to do a test called endoscopy. In this test, a scope with a lighted end is inserted into the mouth and passed through the esophagus into the stomach. Endoscopy will confirm the diagnosis and can also look for other disorders such as ulcers, abnormal tissue, and cancer in the esophagus.

## How Is Zenker's Diverticulum Treated?

Surgery is the recommended treatment for people with symptoms. For people without symptoms and with a small diverticulum (less than ¼ inch), treatment may be conservative. This means that the doctor will wait for symptoms to occur before doing surgery.

Surgery helps dysphagia, cough, and aspiration in almost all people.

## DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Zenker's Diverticulum:

- ✓ **DO** realize that Zenker's diverticulum can sometimes return after surgery (less than 4% of cases).
- ✓ **DO** understand that if treatment is conservative, you should eat soft foods (e.g., mashed potatoes) that can be easily chewed and swallowed.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if you have problems swallowing, develop a fever, or food gets stuck after swallowing.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if you have shortness of breath.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if you need a referral to a gastroenterologist or surgeon.
- ⊗ **DON'T** eat seeds, skins, or nuts. These foods can lead to retaining food in the esophagus and maybe aspirating it.
- ⊗ **DON'T** forget that drugs cannot get rid of the diverticulum. However, medicines may be prescribed for heartburn, acid indigestion, or pneumonia from aspiration.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### Contact the following source:

• American College of Gastroenterology

Tel: (703) 820-7400

Website: <http://www.acg.gi.org>

• American College of Surgeons

Tel: (800) 621-4111

Website: <http://www.facs.org>