



The esophagus connects the mouth to the stomach. Food is moved by wavelike muscle contractions called *peristalsis*. At the bottom of the esophagus is the lower esophageal sphincter (LES), a ring of muscle. When you swallow, the sphincter relaxes and allows food to move into the stomach.

Achalasia is a condition in which both peristalsis and the LES are not working as they should, or not working at all. The esophagus can become enlarged (dilated), and its muscular walls lose their tone and ability to contract/relax. This reduces peristalsis and makes it harder for the esophagus to move food into the stomach. The cause is thought to be nerve damage but how the damage occurs is not known.

Symptoms typically appear slowly: trouble swallowing, mild chest pain (usually mild but occasionally severe), cough at night, lung infections/pneumonia (caused by food being regurgitated up the esophagus and inhaled into the airways). In advanced disease, swallowing problems may lead to weight loss. The incidence of esophageal cancer is significantly higher in patients with achalasia.

Treatment is aimed at removing obstructions caused by the failure of the LES muscle to relax. This may be done with drugs, manual dilation of the sphincter muscle, or through surgery (Heller or peroral endoscopic myotomy (POEM) surgery). About 15% of those who have surgery have acid reflux symptoms afterwards.