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Boston University
UNCOMMON FORM OF ESOPHAGEAL CANCER ON RISE

Boston, Mass.--An uncommon form of esophageal cancer, known as adenocarcinoma, may be occurring five times more frequently than in the past, according to a study conducted by Paul Hesketh, M.D., a medical oncologist at the University Hospital in Boston. Published in the July 15 issue of Cancer, the study shows that adenocarcinoma, which previously accounted for less than 5 percent of esophageal cancers, may now account for as much as 30 percent.

Each year approximately 10,000 Americans are diagnosed with esophageal cancer—usually squamous cell carcinoma. "In recent years, however, we've been noticing that more of our patients have adenocarcinoma," says Hesketh. "We conducted the study to learn whether what we were encountering was a real phenomenon or just chance."

Adenocarcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma are equally malignant and deadly cancers. But, while scientists are beginning to understand some of the causes of squamous cell carcinoma, such as alcohol, smoking, etc., they have almost no information on the etiology of adenocarcinoma of the esophagus.

Hesketh and his colleagues analyzed case record data from tumor registries at the University Hospital (UH) and the Boston Veterans Administration Medical Center (BVAMC). They found that over a recent five-year period at UH and BVAMC, 231 cases of esophageal cancer were reported and that 31 percent of them were adenocarcinomas. Statewide data revealed that 27 percent of 686 esophageal cancers reported between 1982 and 1984 were adenocarcinomas. In both cases the incidence among men was higher than among women and the incidence among blacks was very low.

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To put their findings in an historical perspective, researchers compared their data with data from Connecticut's tumor registry, one of the oldest and most comprehensive registries in the country. They found that between 1955 and 1986 there had been a significant upward trend in the numbers of reported adenocarcinomas. And, in recent years (1983-1986), 22 percent of esophageal cancers were classified as adenocarcinoma.

To rule out the phenomenon as a regional trend, researchers analyzed data from the National Cancer Institute's Seer's Program, a compilation of data from registries throughout the country, and found a similar increase in the disease. The higher frequency among men and lower incidence among blacks was also seen in the Connecticut and national statistics.

Finally, to ensure that the results were not due to changes in diagnostic techniques or criteria, researchers went back to the case records of all patients at the two Boston hospitals and re-analyzed them according to criteria used in earlier studies about the disease. Even following this re-analysis, the incidence was still three to five times higher than that reported in earlier studies.

"We've concluded, therefore, that there is a real three-to-five-fold rise in the frequency of this disease," says Hesketh.

The next step, according to Hesketh, will be to begin to identify the risk factors--such as diet, environment, or behavior--that are shared by adenocarcinoma patients and the factors that may be causing a possibly related decrease in the incidence of squamous cell cancers.

The University Hospital, founded in 1855, is a principal teaching hospital of Boston University School of Medicine and a member of the Boston University Medical Center.