

Possible oesophageal cancer?

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My mother is currently awaiting test results after a recent visit to the doctor concerning difficulty swallowing. The national health service here in the UK is a little slow, and the wait is gnawing at me. I know a diagnosis via news group is impossible, but I was wondering if anyone had any insights that could add to my understanding. We fear cancer, but also fear that we may be adding 2 and 2 and getting 5.

My mother is 71, morbidly obese and has a dreadful diet revolving around cheese, chocolate, milk, pate, biscuits and soup. She smoked heavily for 50+ years, but stopped 3 years ago. She was also an alcoholic for 10 years, drinking about three quarters of a litre of whiskey a day; she stopped drinking just over a year ago. Her father died of oesophageal cancer and her brother contracted mouth cancer around the age of 65. She has also been without dentures in her lower mouth for about 5 years. In addition, she has suffered an ear infection for the past 2 years.

She visited her doctor about a week ago and was immediately sent for a chest X-Ray. Her doctor told her that he didn't think there was anything seriously wrong with her, but that she should have an X-Ray to make sure.

Her symptoms have lasted about 18 months and haven't got any worse:

1. Every morning she coughs up copious amounts of white flegm.
2. If she eats anything that doesn't break down to "slush" like chocolate or soft cheese, she feels she has to stick her fingers down her throat. She never brings food back up, only white flegm. Eating meat, or bread, or thick porridge will cause her to try and make herself sick. She never brings up vomit or bile either, or, any fluids she has drunk.
3. She feels that the food is getting stuck half way down her chest. She is convinced there is a blockage and experiences indigestion every other time she eats. The food always eventually goes down. She experiences mild heart burn a couple of times a week, but it doesn't last long.

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4. On a few occasions a week, she experiences a slight soreness of throat if she drinks something too hot, or more importantly, too spicy e.g. soup or ginger beer. She doesn't generally report a sore throat and her voice isn't hoarse.

5. She wants to eat a more varied diet, but her difficulty swallowing is preventing it. This is depressing her greatly. She is currently on a waiting list for national health service lower dentures (she refuses to allow anyone of her family to buy her any.)

6. Often after regurgitating flegm, she starts to cough a little (for a few seconds), and sneeze a lot, with her nose streaming mucus.

7. Her ears are dry and crusty, obviously infected and sometimes stream. She has recently been given an antibiotic ear spray which has cleared things up quite a lot. Her ears are not totally clear however – we assume she needs further treatment. She reports that her swallowing difficulties have improved slightly since taking the ear spray.

8. She is very windy/gassy especially after eating, belching quite a lot.

9. She is on no form of medication and has never had a major (or for that matter minor) illness apart from what I've mentioned above.

10. She has never coughed up blood.

11. A few times a week, whatever she eats or drinks will seem to "stick".

Q1. Could she be suffering from some kind of ear, nose and throat infection? Could such an infection coupled with poor dentures and a history of generally abusing her system – smoking and drinking – explain her symptoms?

Q2. Could her father's cancer – oesophageal cancer – be a possibility?

Many thanks in advance for any comments you could give to help clarify matters/assuage our fears/confirm our suspicions, or any advice you could give us on how to take things forward.

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