Esophageal Injury

What is an esophageal injury?
The esophagus is the tube that connects your mouth to your stomach. When you eat or drink, it goes down this tube to reach your stomach. This type of injury most often occurs as a wound to your neck such as a stab or gunshot wound.

What are the signs and symptoms?
Your symptoms will depend on the extent of your injury. These symptoms most often include: pain and tenderness in the neck, problems swallowing, shortness of breath, rapid breathing, fever, chest pain, and abdominal pain. Other symptoms that are seen less often include: bloody sputum, wheezing while inhaling, and hoarseness.

What tests will I need?
- X-ray
- CT scan
- Endoscopy

How is it treated?
Surgery is often needed to repair the injury. The surgeons will repair the esophagus by stitching the tear. They will also place a drain at the site of the repair to drain any extra fluid and keep the repaired site clean. If surgery is not needed, you will be watched closely for a couple days. During this time, be sure to let the trauma team know if your symptoms get worse.

What will happen during my hospital stay?
After surgery or while you are being closely watched, you will not be able to eat or drink. The doctors will decide when you may eat and drink again. You may need to have a tube placed down your esophagus to help your stomach get rid of excess gas and fluid. You will receive fluids through your IV to keep you hydrated. You may be given tube feedings for nutrition while allowing extra time for your esophagus to heal through a feeding tube in your nose. You will be given medicine for the pain as you need it. Please let your nurse know if you are having pain. You will be given a tetanus shot and antibiotics.

What complications could occur?
If your injury is repaired in surgery, complications can include a leak, wound infection, pneumonia, or inflammation of your chest tissue. To prevent these problems and catch them early, the staff will be drawing daily blood tests, taking X-rays, and checking to see how you breathe and swallow.
What should I do if I have problems when I leave the hospital?
Patients can contact the Trauma Clinic at (608) 263-7502

After hours, nights, weekends, and holidays, this will give you the paging operator. Ask for the resident on call for your clinic. Leave your name and phone number with the area code. The doctor will call you back.

If you live out of the area, please call 1-800-323-8942 and ask for your clinic.