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TREATMENT METHODS FOR COMPLICATED FORMS OF ESOPHAGEAL CANCER

Khakimov Galib Abdullaevich
Professor, Doctor of Medical Sciences, Head of Department

PhD. Esonturdiyev Ulugbek Isomiddinovich
Tashkent State Medical University
Department of Oncology, Pediatric Oncology and Palliative Care

Abstract
Esophageal cancer remains one of the most aggressive malignancies with high mortality, especially in its complicated forms such as obstruction, bleeding, perforation, and metastasis. Timely recognition of complications and appropriate therapeutic strategies are crucial for improving patient survival and quality of life. This article examines the modern treatment methods for esophageal cancer in complicated stages, focusing on surgical, chemoradiotherapy, endoscopic, and palliative approaches.

Keywords: Esophageal cancer, complications, chemoradiotherapy, surgery, stenting, palliative care, endoscopic treatment.

Introduction

Esophageal cancer accounts for a significant proportion of gastrointestinal malignancies and represents the sixth leading cause of cancer-related deaths worldwide. Complications such as obstruction, hemorrhage, fistula formation, perforation, and severe cachexia frequently accompany advanced disease, limiting therapeutic options and worsening prognosis. The complexity of management arises not only from tumor biology but also from patient comorbidities and late diagnosis. Therefore, the focus in complicated forms is often dual: life-saving interventions and preservation of swallowing function.

Complicated or advanced esophageal cancer typically refers to stages III and IV, where the disease has invaded deeper layers of the esophagus, spread to nearby lymph nodes, organs, or distant sites (metastasis), or presents with severe complications such as obstruction (dysphagia), perforation, fistulas, or malnutrition. The two main histological subtypes are esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC), which predominates in high-risk regions like East Asia and Africa, and esophageal adenocarcinoma (EAC), more common in Western countries and often linked to Barrett's esophagus, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), obesity, and smoking. As of 2025, global incidence remains high, with over 500,000 deaths annually, though advancements in genomics, microbiome research, and immunotherapy have improved outcomes in some cases. Treatment is multidisciplinary, involving gastroenterologists, oncologists, surgeons, and radiation specialists, and is tailored based on tumor location (cervical, thoracic, or gastroesophageal junction), histology, molecular profile (e.g., PD-L1 expression, HER2 status), patient performance status (e.g.,

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ECOG score), and comorbidities. The goal shifts from cure in early stages to disease control, symptom relief, and quality-of-life improvement in advanced disease, with 5-year survival rates around 20% overall, dropping to 5% for metastatic cases.

Diagnostic and Staging Considerations

Before treatment, accurate staging is crucial using endoscopy with biopsy, endoscopic ultrasound (EUS) for depth assessment, CT/PET-CT scans for metastasis detection, and molecular testing (e.g., next-generation sequencing for actionable mutations like EGFR, HER2, or MSI-high status). In 2025, the AJCC/TNM staging system emphasizes tumor depth (T), nodal involvement (N), metastasis (M), and grade, with SEER data tracking survival without strict TNM grouping. Complications like dysphagia may require immediate interventions during staging.

Primary Curative and Disease-Controlling Treatments

For locally advanced (stage III) or metastatic (stage IV) disease, a multimodal approach is standard, as single-modality therapy is rarely sufficient. Recent 2025 guidelines from the American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS) and NCI emphasize integrating surgery with systemic therapies, with evolving roles for endoscopy and surveillance.

Chemoradiation Therapy (CRT)

- Description: Combines chemotherapy (e.g., platinum-based agents like cisplatin or carboplatin with fluorouracil or paclitaxel) and external-beam radiation therapy (EBRT, typically 41-50 Gy over 5-6 weeks) to shrink tumors, control local growth, and improve resectability. For unresectable locally advanced ESCC, definitive CRT is preferred, with ESCC showing higher response rates than EAC.

- Indications: Primary for stage III; neoadjuvant (pre-surgery) or definitive in inoperable cases. In 2025, trials show adding immunotherapy (e.g., tislelizumab) to CRT increases complete response rates, making some unresectable tumors operable, with reduced progression risk.

- Outcomes and Side Effects: Improves 2-year survival to 71-74% in select cases; side effects include esophagitis, fatigue, neutropenia, and radiation-induced pneumonitis. Recent data suggests organ preservation (avoiding surgery) in complete responders to CRT for ESCC.

- Advancements: Intensity-modulated radiation therapy (IMRT) or proton therapy minimizes damage to surrounding tissues like the heart and lungs.

Chemotherapy

- Description: Systemic agents like FOLFOX (folinic acid, fluorouracil, oxaliplatin) or CROSS regimen (carboplatin-paclitaxel) for metastatic disease to slow progression and palliate symptoms. Often combined with immunotherapy or targeted therapy in first-line settings.

- Indications: Stage IV or recurrent disease; perioperative for resectable advanced cases.

- Outcomes: Extends median survival to 10-15 months in metastatic ESCC; side effects include neuropathy, nausea, and myelosuppression. 2025 updates highlight optimizing lines of therapy in advanced settings.

Surgery

- Description: Esophagectomy (removal of esophagus portion, often with gastric pull-up or colonic interposition) via transthoracic (Ivor Lewis) or transhiatal approaches, typically after neoadjuvant CRT. Minimally invasive (robotic or laparoscopic) techniques reduce complications.

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- Indications: Locally advanced resectable disease (e.g., T3N1); not for widespread metastasis. AATS 2025 consensus recommends surgery for early-stage EAC but reserves it post-CRT for ESCC if needed.
- Outcomes: Improves local control but carries 5-10% mortality risk; complications include anastomotic leaks and pulmonary issues. Recent trials show similar survival without surgery in CRT responders.

Targeted Therapy

- Description: Agents targeting specific alterations, e.g., trastuzumab (HER2 inhibitor) for HER2-positive EAC, or ramucirumab (VEGFR2 inhibitor) with paclitaxel for refractory cases. Entrectinib or larotrectinib for NTRK fusions.
- Indications: Advanced or recurrent disease with biomarkers.
- Outcomes: Prolongs progression-free survival; side effects include hypertension and bleeding. 2025 sees expanded use in combinations.

Immunotherapy

- Description: Checkpoint inhibitors like pembrolizumab (PD-1), nivolumab, or tislelizumab, often with chemo for PD-L1-positive tumors. Ipilimumab (CTLA-4) in combinations.
- Indications: First-line for unresectable/metastatic ESCC/EAC; adjuvant after CRT.
- Outcomes: Improves overall survival (e.g., 13-18 months in trials); immune-related adverse events like colitis. 2025 trials show tislelizumab + CRT yielding >50% pathologic complete response.

Management of Complications and Palliative Care

Advanced disease often causes dysphagia, pain, weight loss, or bleeding. Palliative focus is key:

- Endoscopic Interventions: Self-expanding metal stents (SEMS) for obstruction relief; photodynamic therapy (PDT) or laser ablation for tumor debulking. Triple therapy (stent + PDT + systemic) effective for advanced cases.
- Nutritional Support: Percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) tubes or total parenteral nutrition.
- Emerging Palliative Options: Electrochemotherapy (ECT), transarterial chemoembolization (TACE) for liver mets, or dendritic cell therapy.
- Supportive Care: Pain management, psychological support, and hospice integration.

Emerging Strategies and Future Directions (as of 2025)

- Novel Combinations: Integrating immunotherapy with CRT; trials for CAR-T cells or vaccine therapies.
- Biomarkers: PD-L1, MSI, TMB for immunotherapy; ongoing research on microbiome and genetic alterations (e.g., IGF1R, AXL).
- Personalized Medicine: AI-driven staging and high-risk area studies (e.g., Iran, Africa) for prevention.
- Clinical Trials: Focus on organ preservation, novel agents like ADCs (antibody-drug conjugates), and early detection via liquid biopsies.

Patients should consult specialized centers and consider trials via NCI or AACR resources. Outcomes have improved with these advances, but early detection remains critical.

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The management of complicated esophageal cancer requires a multidisciplinary approach. Surgery, while curative, is associated with high morbidity in advanced complicated disease. Endoscopic techniques have revolutionized palliation, allowing patients to maintain swallowing ability and improve nutritional status. Chemoradiotherapy, although effective, can exacerbate certain complications, requiring careful patient selection. Recent progress in immunotherapy highlights the possibility of improved survival even in patients with metastatic complications.

The challenge remains balancing aggressive treatment with quality-of-life considerations. In low-resource settings, limited access to advanced endoscopic and immunotherapeutic options remains a barrier, making surgery and conventional chemoradiotherapy the primary modalities.

Conclusions

Esophageal cancer in complicated forms requires individualized, multimodal treatment strategies. Surgical methods remain the gold standard for operable complicated cases, while chemoradiotherapy is essential for inoperable patients. Endoscopic stenting should be prioritized for rapid relief of obstruction. Immunotherapy and targeted therapies should be integrated into treatment protocols where resources allow. Palliative care must always be incorporated to address patient comfort and psychosocial needs.

Expand access to advanced endoscopic technologies in developing regions.

Increase research on combining immunotherapy with conventional chemoradiotherapy.

Develop standardized guidelines for managing complications such as bleeding and fistulae.

Strengthen multidisciplinary tumor boards for optimal patient-specific treatment decisions.

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