

Commentary on Current Literature

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Esophageal pH Monitoring, Indications, and Methods

Sarani B, Gleiber M, Evans SRT.

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Symptomatic gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is a common problem that affects a substantial proportion of the American population. It is estimated that the symptoms of GERD may afflict 40% to 45% of Americans each month. The diagnosis of GERD can be difficult, as its symptoms vary from typical symptoms like heartburn to atypical symptoms such as hoarseness, coughing, and chest pain. Most patients present with typical symptoms and are diagnosed with GERD if they respond to empiric trials of acid suppression. Many tests are available to help with diagnosing GERD in patients who either present with atypical symptoms or who do not respond to acid suppression; however, each test has its own shortcomings. The only test that directly measures whether acid is refluxing into the esophagus is the pH probe, but this test is uncomfortable for the patient, can be difficult to interpret, and may not be necessary in all cases. This article reviews the indications for pH monitoring, its technique, its advantages and limitations, and its role [in] the diagnosis of GERD.

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This clinical review by Sarani et al provides the reader with an excellent and comprehensive guide for the role of esophageal pH monitoring in the evaluation of GERD. The test is technically demanding with respect to equipment and placement of the catheter tip but provides accurate data with regard to whether reflux is occurring and whether reflux is causing symptoms. These authors conclude that patients who stand to benefit the most from pH monitoring are those who present with atypical symptoms, are refractory to therapy and have esophagitis, have had previous gastric or esophageal surgery with symptoms of GERD, cannot communicate the symptoms effectively, or have motility disorders that may be secondary to GERD. Additionally, patients who are undergoing an evaluation for surgical treatment of GERD should have esophageal pH monitoring prior to surgery to confirm the diagnosis.