



## Zenker's Diverticulum

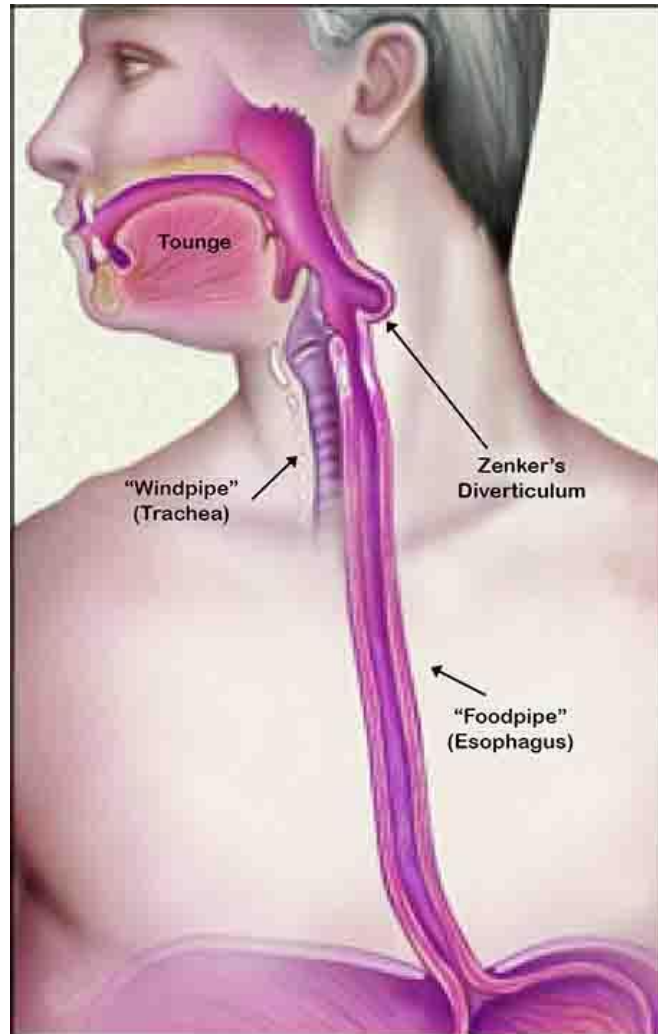
You may have heard of diverticulosis of the colon (large intestine) when little pouches form on the colon's wall. Did you know you can also form diverticulosis of the throat? This less common condition is called Zenker's Diverticulum. It is characterized by the formation of a hollow pouch-like structure at the back of the throat, just above the esophagus. It is more prevalent in older adults, particularly those over 60. This throat pocket, or diverticulum, acts as a trap for food and saliva, leading to difficulty swallowing.

### Causes and Risk Factors

While the precise cause of Zenker's Diverticulum is not fully understood, it is believed to be associated with increased pressure within the esophagus and age-related weakening of throat muscles. It is not preventable. It just happens sometimes. It occurs in about one adult in 10,000. This condition was first recognized in 1769 but was named 100 years later by German pathologist Friedrich Von Zenker in 1877.

### Symptoms and Their Impact

The symptoms of Zenker's Diverticulum are diverse, ranging from difficulty swallowing (dysphagia) and a sensation of food being stuck in the throat to regurgitation of undigested food, chronic coughing, and bad breath (halitosis). Some patients complain of difficulty swallowing pills. These symptoms can significantly impact daily life, causing discomfort and social embarrassment.



## How Does Your Doctor Know?

Diagnosis is the first step in treatment. Many possible conditions cause difficulty swallowing - some more serious than others. Your doctor's job is to sort through these possibilities to arrive at the correct diagnosis. This involves specific tests to visualize the throat and esophagus. A barium swallow X-ray is a standard diagnostic tool, where you swallow a liquid chalky barium solution that coats the lining of your esophagus, making it visible on X-rays. Endoscopy is another diagnostic method where a thin, flexible tube with a camera is used to examine the inside of your throat and esophagus.



## Treatment

Treatment for Zenker's Diverticulum is highly individualized, depending on the size of the diverticulum and the severity of your symptoms. Minor cases may require no immediate intervention, while significant or symptomatic cases often necessitate surgical procedures. The current gold standard is a minimally invasive "scope" procedure called an endoscopic cricopharyngeal myotomy (cutting a specific throat muscle to reduce pressure).

## Lifestyle Adjustments for Better Living

Living with Zenker's Diverticulum often requires adjustments to your eating habits and lifestyle. Eating smaller, more frequent meals and avoiding foods that are difficult to swallow can alleviate symptoms. Posture is also important; staying upright after meals and elevating your head while sleeping can help prevent discomfort and regurgitation.

## Conclusion

Zenker's Diverticulum is a relatively rare cause of difficulty swallowing. It can be diagnosed using special imaging procedures. Smaller pockets require less aggressive treatment, but surgical techniques are available for more severe cases. Most patients don't require surgery. There are many reasons to have difficulty swallowing. If you have persistent difficulty swallowing, see your doctor.



## Center For Digestive Health & Nutrition

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