

Ulcers

An ulcer in your digestive tract is like an open sore. Similar to sores elsewhere, the top layer of tissue is gone and the sore is hollowed out like a crater. Although many ulcers heal by themselves, most come back within a year.

Most of the time when a person is diagnosed as having an ulcer, it is in the duodenum and is called a duodenal ulcer. The duodenum is the part of your intestine that is just below your stomach. Another type is called the gastric ulcer and it occurs in the stomach itself. You are not alone if you have an ulcer, because over 25 million people have one. Men and women, young and old, can get ulcers.

What causes or contributes to ulcers?

Although we used to think that spicy food and stress were the major causes ulcers, we now know that not to be true. A bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori* -- abbreviated *H. pylori* -- is found in approximately 9 out of 10 patients with duodenal ulcers. In addition to *H. pylori* there are other factors that can increase the risk of getting an ulcer.

Pain medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen increase your chances of having an ulcer because they can affect the protective layer of mucous in your stomach.

Smoking increases your chances of getting an ulcer and delays or prevents ulcer healing.

Family History, such as if your parents or siblings have an ulcer, can also increase your chances of developing one.

What is *H. pylori*?

Helicobacter pylori is a spiral shaped bacterium. Because of its shape and the way it moves, *H. pylori* can penetrate the protective lining of the stomach. When that problem occurs, excess acid can irritate the stomach and duodenum, eventually causing an ulcer. *H. pylori* is associated with approximately 90% of duodenal ulcers and 80% of gastric ulcers.

Even after an ulcer has healed, it is likely to come back within a year. But when *H. pylori* is completely eliminated from the digestive tract, the chances that a duodenal ulcer will return are greatly reduced.

How common is *H. pylori*?

Approximately two-thirds of the world's adult population is infected with *H. pylori*. In this country, more older adults are affected than any other age group. African americans and Hispanics are also common patient types for *H. pylori*. Almost everyone who has a duodenal ulcer has *H. pylori*, but not everyone who has *H. pylori* gets an ulcer.

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How do people get infected with *H. pylori*?

Why some people develop symptoms with *H. pylori* and why others do not is largely unknown. *H. pylori* can be contagious in early childhood through fecal-oral or oral-oral routes. The bacterium can also be spread as a result of a person's food or water being contaminated.

What illnesses does *H. pylori* cause?

Most persons who are infected with *H. pylori* never suffer from any symptoms related to the infection. However, in some people infection with *H. pylori* can cause duodenal and gastric ulcers. *H. pylori* can also cause a chronic and severe inflammation of the stomach with a wasting away of the stomach's mucous layer in adults and children. This condition is called atrophic gastritis.

People infected with *H. pylori* are 2 to 6 times more likely to develop certain types of cancer, including gastric cancer, compared with uninfected people. Gastric cancer is the second most prevalent form of cancer in the world.

What can people do to prevent *H. pylori* infection?

Since the causes of *H. pylori* infection and how it is transmitted have not been clearly identified, it's difficult to suggest how to stay clear of this bacterium. Nevertheless, living in a clean and healthy environment can help reduce the risk of infection.

What are the common symptoms of an ulcer?

A burning or cramping pain in the stomach is one of the most frequently encountered symptoms of a gastric or duodenal ulcer. With a gastric ulcer, eating or drinking may cause stomach pain. On the other hand, with a duodenal ulcer eating and drinking may alleviate the pain for 2 to 3 hours. Belching and bloating are also common symptoms of ulcers. Nausea and vomiting can also sometimes occur.

How can my doctor find out if I have an ulcer?

Upper GI series is a common test that x-rays the esophagus, the first small part of the intestine and the stomach. The patient swallows a harmless liquid mixture that allows your doctor to see details inside your digestive tract. Many ulcers are found using this test.

Endoscopy is an outpatient procedure in which your doctor places an endoscope, a small tube with a tiny video camera on the end, through your mouth and into your esophagus and stomach. This test is usually performed with the aid of sedatives. With an endoscope, your doctor can actually see if there is an ulcer, how big it is and if there is more than one ulcer. It can also be used to determine if something other than an ulcer is causing the problem. Your primary care doctor may refer you to a specialist for this procedure.

How can my doctor tell if I am infected with *H. pylori*?

Blood test: Your doctor can draw a sample of your blood and analyze it to detect the presence of the *H. pylori* bacterium.

Breath test: Your doctor can give you a harmless liquid drink and then have you breath into a special tube to determine the presence of *H. pylori*.

Biopsy: Your doctor can use an endoscope to take a small tissue sample, or biopsy, of your stomach lining. The tissue is then studied under a microscope to see if *H. pylori* is present.

How do I heal my ulcers?

Ulcers can be healed with medications the reduce stomach acid. Although acid-reducing drugs can help heal ulcers, they do not kill off *H. pylori* bacterium. Antibiotics are used in combination with acid-reducing drugs to kill *H. pylori*. Always consult with your doctor before taking any medication because only your doctor knows which one is right for you.

How long will I need to take my medicine?

Usually, an acid-reducing drug will heal the ulcer within 1 to 2 months. But the ulcer pain will probably go away within a few weeks. Just because your pain has gone away, don't assume your ulcer has healed! It's important that you continue taking your medication as directed, even if you feel better. Only your doctor can know for sure how long you will need to take your medicine.

Source: Tap Pharmaceutical, Inc.

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