

Stomach Ulcers

Contrary to long-held beliefs, going outside with wet hair will not cause a cold, sitting too close to the television will not damage the eyes, and getting a tan will not clear up acne. Add to that list the fact that scientists now know that stomach ulcers are not caused by stress or spicy foods. Rather, most stomach ulcers, also known as gastric ulcers, are actually caused by a corkscrew-shaped bacterium called *Helicobacter pyloricus*, or *H. pylori* for short.

Stomach ulcers are open sores on the inside lining of the stomach. These sores also can occur in the duodenum (the beginning of the intestine) and esophagus. While most ulcers are caused by *H. pylori*, which is believed to spread through contaminated food or water, they also may result from regular use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) that are taken relieve pain. People at increased risk for developing ulcers include those who have a family history of ulcer disease, drink excessively, are 50 years old and older, and smoke.

Symptoms of stomach ulcers can vary from person to person. The most common signs include abdominal pain, feeling worse after eating or drinking, bloating, vomiting, unexpected weight loss and nausea. Anyone who experiences sudden, severe stomach pain, black stools or bloody vomit should seek immediate emergency medical care.

Ulcers can be diagnosed using a blood test to check for *H. pylori* antibodies, taking a urea breath test that uses a radioactive carbon atom to detect *H. pylori* or testing a stool sample for *H. pylori*. An upper gastrointestinal X-ray also can be done as well as an endoscopy, which involves threading a tube with an attached camera into the stomach so the doctor can actually see if there is an ulcer present.

If the ulcer is caused by NSAIDs, these drugs should be avoided to promote healing. Ulcers caused by bacteria typically require taking a combination of two antibiotics and bismuth subsalicylate (such as Pepto-Bismol) for about two weeks to treat the *H. pylori* infection. Other medicines prescribed to treat stomach ulcers include: acid blockers to help reduce the amount of hydrochloric acid that the stomach makes; antacids to neutralize stomach acid; and proton pump inhibitors to suppress the secretion of acid in the stomach.

Ulcers that are not treated can lead to severe complications, such as bleeding that can cause weakness or vomiting blood, perforation leading to leakage of stomach contents into the abdominal cavity and gastric obstruction that may cause diminished appetite and weight loss. Many people have *H. pylori* in their stomachs without ever experiencing pain or ulcers. However, those who do develop ulcers should follow their doctor's instructions closely, even when the pain has gone away. If there is still an infection, an ulcer could occur again, or, in some cases, stomach cancer could develop. Because of this, some patients may need to repeat their treatment to kill the *H. pylori* bacteria. For more information about stomach ulcers, talk with your doctor.