

Peptic Ulcer Disease

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What is it?

Peptic ulcers are sores on the lining of your digestive tract. The word "peptic" is used because this describes something related to stomach acid. Many ulcers are located in the *duodenum*. The duodenum is the first part of the intestine. These ulcers are called *duodenal ulcers*. Ulcers located in the stomach are called *gastric ulcers*. Ulcers in the esophagus are called *esophageal ulcers*. There are two other disorders which are similar in many ways to ulcers. These are the inflamed lower esophagus (*esophagitis*) and an inflamed stomach lining (*gastritis*).

What causes it?

Duodenal and gastric ulcers occur when acid and other juices made by the stomach burn the lining of your digestive tract. This can happen if your body makes too much acid or if the lining of your digestive tract is damaged in some way. Esophageal ulcers occur when stomach acid makes its way into the lower esophagus.

Even though most people use anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) without problems, they can sometimes damage the intestinal lining and cause ulcers. NSAIDs include aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin and Nuprin),

naproxen (Aleve) and many prescription drugs for arthritis and related problems. Acetaminophen (Datril, Panadol, and Tylenol) doesn't damage the stomach lining or esophagus.

Most peptic ulcers not caused by anti-inflammatory drugs are now thought to be caused by an infection with a type of bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*). The bacteria make ulcers harder to cure. *H. pylori* and NSAIDs can erode the mucus lining that protects the stomach from its own acid. Smoking also seems to delay or prevent ulcer healing.

Who gets it?

Peptic ulcer disease affects between 5 and 10% of Americans during their lifetime. Prescription medicines to treat peptic ulcer disease remain the most prescribed medicines in the United States. Both adults and children can get peptic ulcers.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is burning pain, especially just below the breast bone. You may think the pain feels like a knife going straight through to your back. The pain is usually worse a couple of hours after a meal, or in the middle of the night when your stomach is empty. If the pain suddenly gets worse, the ulcer may have broken through the stomach wall.

Symptoms of Peptic Ulcers

- Heavy feeling, bloating, burning or dull pain anywhere in your stomach.
- Stomach pain that may wake you up at night.
- Feel better when you eat or drink and feel worse an hour or two after eating (duodenal ulcer)
- Feel worse when you eat or drink (gastric ulcer).
- Feeling full fast.
- Times when you feel bad & then times when you feel good in between.
- Nausea and Vomiting.
- Weight loss.

How do you prevent it?

The best way to treat an ulcer is to prevent it. To help prevent ulcers, wash your hands before meals and after using the bathroom to prevent the spread of *H pylori*. If you must take an NSAID that can cause ulcers, take it with food. You don't need to be on a special diet unless your doctor suggests it. If you drink alcohol, drink it in moderation and not on an empty stomach. Most important of all, if you smoke, quit! Smoking increases your chances of both getting and ulcer and relapsing. It also slows ulcer healing.

Eating may affect your ulcer, but it isn't true for everyone. Certain foods and drinks may be more likely to make your ulcer worse. These include regular and decaffeinated coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate, meat extracts, alcohol, black pepper, chili powder, mustard seed, and nutmeg. You may want to avoid these things to see if this helps you feel better.

Keep your diet balanced. Don't avoid foods unless they have bothered you more than once. If you drink alcohol or caffeine drinks, drink them only when you are eating and in small amounts.

Eating small, frequent meals when you're having pain may help you feel better.

Can it be treated?

The idea behind treating ulcers is to lower the amount of acid that your stomach makes, to neutralize the acid that is made and to protect the injured area so it can have time to heal.

- **Stop smoking** and avoid smoky rooms. Cigarette smoke damages the lining of the digestive tract and delays ulcer healing.

- **Antacids** neutralize acid that the stomach makes. They usually improve symptoms faster than other medicines, but healing can be prolonged.

- **Sucralfate** (Carafate) coats your ulcer to protect it from the acids so it has time to heal.

- **H2 blockers** (ranitidine, cimetidine, famotidine) reduce the amount of acid that your stomach makes. They usually help people start to feel better within 3 days. These medications can be dosed one or two times per day. They are all now available over-the-counter in half the usual prescription strength.

- **Proton pump inhibitors** (omeprazole, Nexium, Prilosec OTC, Prevacid, Protonix, Aciphex) almost completely stop the stomach from making acid. They are often used if H2 Blockers haven't helped.

- **Antibiotics** may be used in combination with bismuth (Pepto-Bismol), H2 blockers or proton pump inhibitors if infection with *H pylori* is causing the ulcer.

- **Surgery** is rarely necessary. However, if you do not respond to medication, have recurrent ulcers or you

have significant complications, surgery to remove the ulcer area may be considered.

Are there complications?

There are usually not complications from ulcers which are properly treated. Ulcers don't cause cancer, but some cancers can form ulcers as they grow. This is more common for cancer of the stomach than with cancer of the esophagus or duodenum.

Warning signs

- Vomiting blood
- Vomiting food eaten hours or days before
- Feeling cold or clammy
- Feeling unusually weak or dizzy
- Blood in your stools or dark black stools
- Ongoing nausea or repeated vomiting
- Sudden severe abdominal pain
- Weight loss
- Lack of improvement with treatment
- Pain radiating into the back

Ulcers sometimes can lead to other problems. These problems include bleeding, perforation (when the ulcer eats all the way through the wall of your digestive tract), or obstruction (when your digestive tract gets blocked and food can't leave your stomach).

In summary

- Ulcers can be caused by too much stomach acid, damage to the lining of the digestive tract or infection by *Helicobacter pylori*.
- The most effective way to prevent ulcers is to adjust your lifestyle - don't smoke, avoid caffeine, alcohol and NSAIDs which can cause ulcers.
- If you have any of the warning signs which indicate a complication for peptic ulcer disease, contact your doctor as soon as possible.
- For more information, contact the National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases at www.niddk.nih.gov or the American Academy of Family Physicians at familydoctor.org.