

A Painful Problem

If you have an ulcer - a sore or crater in the lining of your digestive tract - you know it can be an uncomfortable and even painful condition. But do you know what caused it? Traditionally, ulcers were thought to be caused by too much spicy food, stress, or an anxious personality. We now know that many ulcers are probably due to infection with bacteria known as *Helicobacter pylori*.



Common Ulcer Symptoms

Ulcers may or may not cause symptoms, and the symptoms often come and go. If you have an ulcer, you may notice some of these common symptoms:

- Burning, cramping, or hunger like pain in the stomach area, often one to three hours after a meal or in the middle of the night
- Pain that gets better or worse with eating
- Nausea or vomiting (vomit may be bloody or look like coffee grounds)
- Black, tarry, or bloody stools (which means the ulcer is bleeding)

Your Evaluation

An evaluation by your doctor can show if you have an ulcer and determine whether it was caused by *H. pylori*. Your doctor may ask you questions, examine you, and possibly do some tests. Certain treatment options may be tried first before extensive testing is done.

History

Your doctor will likely ask questions like these: What are your symptoms? How long have you had them? Have you had any bleeding? Do you smoke or take pain relievers? Does anyone in your family have ulcers?



Some Special Tests

An *endoscopic exam*, done through a long tube passed through your mouth into your stomach, can give the doctor a closer look at your ulcer. Blood and breath tests are also available to show whether you have *H. pylori* in your digestive tract.

Your Treatment

After you have been evaluated, your doctor can begin treatment. If tests show that *H. pylori* bacteria are in your digestive tract, medications can be prescribed to kill them so your ulcer can heal.



Medications to Treat the

Ulcer

To kill *H. pylori*, your doctor will probably prescribe antibiotics. Other ulcer medications are often prescribed as well. Most of the time, killing *H. pylori* will keep the ulcer from returning. Occasionally, all of the bacteria are not killed or the bacteria come back. If this happens, another ulcer may develop. So a second round of medication is prescribed in some cases.

When to Call Your Doctor

With proper treatment, most ulcers heal without problems. But if you notice any of the following, call your doctor right away:

- Vomiting frequently or vomiting blood
- Dark, tarry, or blood stools
- Sudden, intense pain
- Continued weight loss
- Continued pain after taking your medication

Where Ulcers Form

An ulcer (a sore or crater) can form in two main areas of the digestive tract - in the duodenum, the space where the stomach meets the small intestine, and in the stomach itself. These areas contain strong acids and enzymes that help digest the food you eat. To keep these substances from also digesting your body's own tissue, the stomach and duodenum are coated with a protective mucus layer.

How *H. pylori* Cause Ulcer

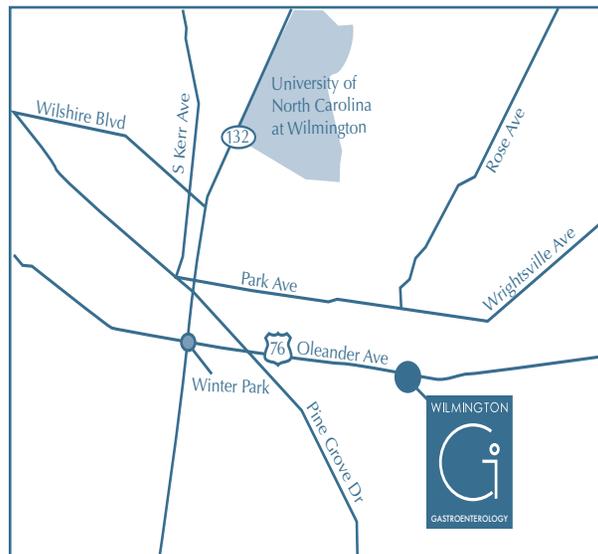
H. pylori bacteria are common and can be passed from one person to another. When *H. pylori* enter the body, they like to hide in the protective mucus layer coating your stomach and duodenum. The bacteria weaken this mucus layer and irritate the tissue underneath. Acid may flow through the weakened mucus layer and burn the underlying inflamed tissue. These factors may lead to formation of an ulcer in the lining of the stomach or duodenum.

Making Treatment Successful

Take all your medication exactly as your doctor or pharmacist instructs. The medication may make you feel worse for a short time. But it is needed to kill the *H. pylori* bacteria and help ensure the ulcer won't return. During this time, avoid cigarettes, aspirin, or NSAIDs like ibuprofen and naproxen. These may prevent an ulcer from healing. They also may make an ulcer more likely to return.

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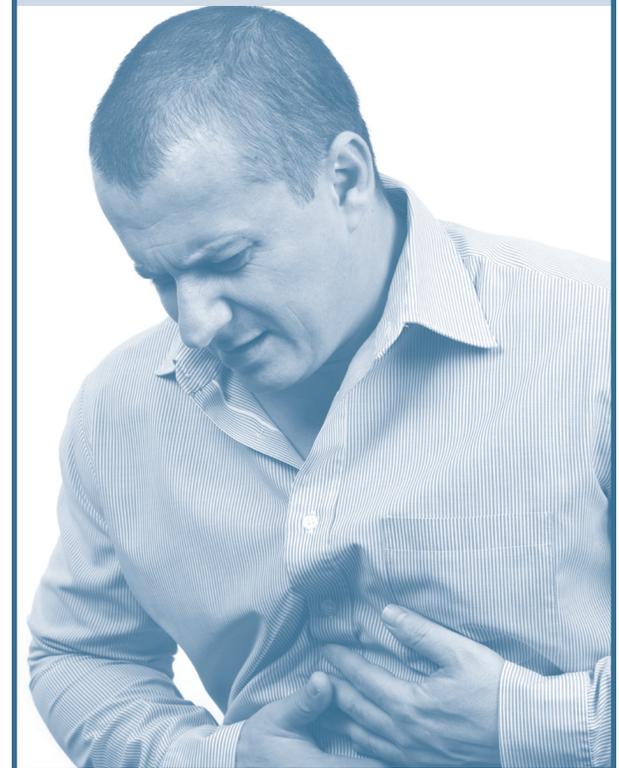
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A Common Cause of Ulcers



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