

Peptic Ulcer Disease

What is Peptic Ulcer Disease?

Peptic ulcers are open sores, or erosions, that occur in the lining of the upper gastrointestinal (GI) tract. The two main types of ulcers are gastric ulcers, which occur in the stomach, and duodenal ulcers, which occur in the upper part of the small intestine.

Peptic ulcers form when stomach acid eats away the protective lining of the digestive tract. This can happen if you are making too much acid or if your protective lining is weaker than normal. Either way, the acid creates painful open sores that have a tendency to bleed.

Peptic ulcers disease can be caused by a number of different things, but the two most common causes are H. Pylori infection and regular use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID), such as ibuprofen, aspirin, or naproxen. Smoking and alcohol use may increase your risk of developing an ulcer, although they alone don't cause an ulcer to form.

What are the Symptoms of Peptic Ulcer Disease?

If you have peptic ulcer disease, you may have no signs or symptoms at all. If you do develop symptoms they may include:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain in the upper abdomen after eating that feels like a gnawing or burning feeling
- Feeling full after eating only a small amount of food
- Heartburn
- Bloating or belching

It is not uncommon for an ulcer to have some bleeding, but this is usually mild and may not even be noticed. If the bleeding is heavier, you may notice blood in your vomit, black or tarry stools, fatigue, or even faint.

How is Peptic Ulcer Disease Diagnosed?

The preferred method to diagnose a peptic ulcer is with an upper endoscopy. This involves inserting a long, narrow tube with a light and tiny camera attached to it (endoscope), through your mouth and esophagus into your stomach and upper part of your small intestine. This allows your doctor to inspect the lining of the upper GI tract for ulcers. If an ulcer is found, it can be biopsied and tested for H. pylori bacteria. If the ulcer is bleeding, the area that is bleeding can be treated during the procedure.



Another method to diagnose peptic ulcers is with a special x-ray called an upper GI series. In order to do this test, you will need to drink a white, chalky liquid called barium and then have a number of

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x-rays taken. This allows your doctor to see if there are any ulcers in the lining of the upper GI tract. If an ulcer is found, you will likely be tested for H. pylori with a blood, stool, or breath test.

How is Peptic Ulcer Disease Treated?

How a peptic ulcer is treated usually depends upon the cause of the ulcer. Nearly everyone with a peptic ulcer is treated with a medication that reduces the amount of acid your stomach produces. The two most common types of medications used for this are proton pump inhibitors and histamine receptor blockers. Sucralfate, which coats ulcers and helps them heal, is another medication that you may be given.

If H. pylori is causing your peptic ulcer, you will be treated with several different medications. You are likely to be given two antibiotics to take for 10 - 14 days, along with a proton pump inhibitor. However, this bacteria can be challenging to treat and up to 20% of patients with H. pylori will not be cured by their first course of treatment. Because of this, you will be retested for H. pylori after completing your treatment. If you still have it, you will receive a second cycle of medication. It is important to complete all medications as prescribed and to follow up with your doctor.

Other things you can do to improve your symptoms are to stop taking NSAIDs, avoid drinking alcohol, and quit smoking, if you smoke.

If you have a gastric ulcer, you will usually have another upper endoscopy a few weeks after your treatment is completed. This is because, in rare instances, stomach ulcers may contain cancer. This risk is not seen with duodenal ulcers, so a repeat endoscopy is not needed.

If left untreated, complications from peptic ulcers can occur, including: bleeding, which can be heavy; a small hole, or perforation, can form in the stomach or small intestine; or an obstruction of the GI tract can occur. These complications are often life-threatening and require immediate surgery to correct the problem.

What is the Prognosis of Peptic Ulcer Disease?

Most people recover from peptic ulcer disease and have no more problems. Occasionally, a peptic ulcer won't heal with proper treatment. If this occurs, your doctor will verify that nothing else could be causing your ulcer. If everything checks out okay, then your doctor will attempt to eliminate anything that could be interfering with your treatment. Also, you are likely to receive a different course of treatment to help the ulcer heal.

Where Can You Get More Information About Peptic Ulcer Disease?

- **American College of Gastroenterology**
<http://patients.gi.org/topics/peptic-ulcer-disease/>
- **National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases**
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/peptic-ulcers-stomach-ulcers>
- **American Gastroenterology Association**
<http://www.gastro.org/patient-care/conditions-diseases/peptic-ulcer-disease>