

ALL ABOUT STOMACH AND DUODENAL ULCERS

What it is and what you can do to prevent it

What is a peptic ulcer? How does it come about? How can I tell if I have the condition?

—alfred_lasco93@yahoo.com

Peptic ulcer is the collective term for stomach and duodenal ulcers—sores that develop in the inside lining of the stomach and duodenum (the first part of the small intestine), respectively. Majority of peptic ulcers are asymptomatic, but if symptoms occur, the most common is burning abdominal pain. Usually, an empty stomach makes the pain worse, but eating certain food items that buffer stomach acid or taking an antacid relieves it. Other frequent manifestations of peptic ulcer include a feeling of fullness, bloating or belching, fatty food intolerance, heartburn, and nausea. Less often, peptic ulcer symptoms are vomiting or vomiting blood,



MEDICAL NOTES
EDUARDO GONZALES, MD

tarry or black stools which suggest the presence of digested blood, and unexplained weight loss.

The signs and symptoms of peptic ulcer are nonspecific. They are the same as those of a few other conditions, notably gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and cancers of the stomach and esophagus. Hence, it is rather difficult for a layman like you to self-diagnose a peptic ulcer. In fact, distinguishing a peptic ulcer from the other conditions that have the same manifestations is often challenging even for a physician. He or she needs a battery of laboratory and imaging exams to help

him out. In any case, knowing what peptic ulcers are all about is still useful so you know how to guard against them and when to see a physician.

What brings about peptic ulcers?

By and large, peptic ulcers are caused either by infection with the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) or long-term use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, and diclofenac. Peptic ulcers are more common in older adults because people in this age group frequently take NSAIDs for joint and body pains.

We don't exactly know yet how *H. pylori* spreads. It may be transmitted from person to person by close contact, such as kissing. It may also spread through food and water. In any case, in people with the infection, the bacteria commonly reside in the mucous layer that lines the stomach and small intestine where often, they cause no problems. But sometimes, they cause inflammation of the lining of either organ, producing a peptic ulcer.

Aspirin, on the other hand, as well as certain NSAIDs, produces ulcers by irritating or inflaming the lining of the stomach and small intestine.

Incidentally, stress, spicy food, alcohol, and smoking are risk factors for peptic ulcer. On their own, they do not cause peptic ulcers, but they can make them worse and more difficult to heal.

Complications of peptic ulcers

The erosion of stomach and duodenum linings that a peptic ulcer brings about can result in, albeit rarely, bleeding and intestinal perforation while the tissue swelling or scar-



ring caused by a peptic ulcer can result in intestinal obstruction.

Bleeding can occur in the form of slow blood loss that leads to anemia or severe blood loss that may require hospitalization or a blood transfusion. Perforation of the wall of the stomach or small intestine, on the other hand, can give rise to infec-

tion and zole and lansoprazole, acid blockers (histamine blockers) that reduce the amount of stomach acid released in the digestive tract such as ranitidine and famotidine, antacids that neutralize stomach acid, and cytoprotective agents that help protect the tissues that line the stomach and small intestine, such as sucralfate and misoprostol.

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What you can do to prevent peptic ulcers

You can protect yourself from *H. pylori* infection if you wash your hands after you use the bathroom and before you prepare or eat food, eat only properly prepared food, and drink only clean water.

You can further minimize your chances of devel-

oping a peptic ulcer if you:

- Shy away from NSAIDs. If you use pain relievers regularly, ask your doctor for safer alternatives.
- Learn to cope with stress through exercise and other relaxation techniques.
- Don't smoke.
- Limit your alcohol intake.
- Avoid spicy food.
- Get enough sleep.

Note: Email inquiries on health matters to: medical_notes2@yahoo.com

