

# What I need to know about Peptic Ulcers



NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH  
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse



U.S. Department  
of Health and  
Human Services

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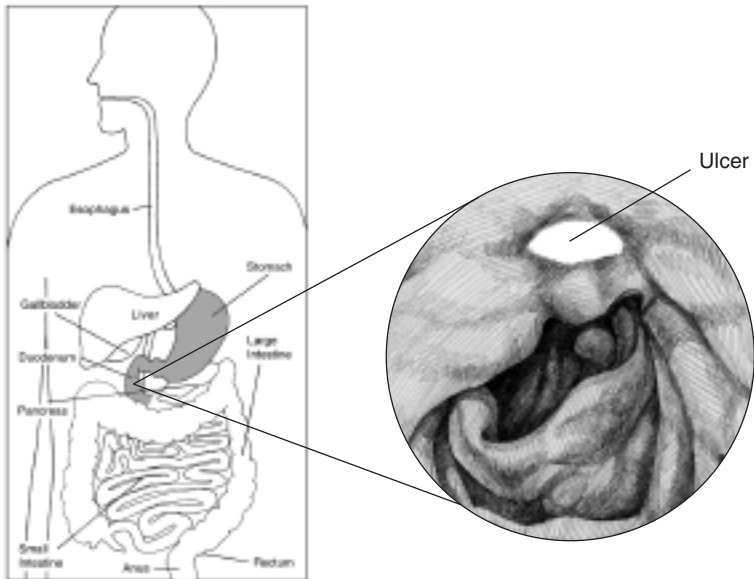
## Contents

What is a peptic ulcer? .....	1
What are the symptoms of peptic ulcers? .....	2
What causes peptic ulcers? .....	4
Do stress or spicy foods cause peptic ulcers? .....	5
What increases my risk of getting peptic ulcers? .....	6
Can peptic ulcers get worse? .....	7
How can I find out whether I have peptic ulcers? .....	8
How are peptic ulcers treated? .....	9
Can I use antacids? .....	10
Can peptic ulcers come back? .....	11
What happens if peptic ulcers don't heal? Will I need surgery? .....	11
What can I do to prevent peptic ulcers? .....	12
What can I do to lower my risk of getting peptic ulcers? .....	12
Glossary .....	13
For More Information .....	13
Acknowledgments .....	14

## What is a peptic ulcer?

A peptic ulcer is a sore in the lining of your stomach or **duodenum**.\* The duodenum is the first part of your small intestine. If peptic ulcers are found in the stomach, they're called gastric ulcers. If they're found in the duodenum, they're called duodenal ulcers. You can have more than one ulcer.

Many people have peptic ulcers. Peptic ulcers can be treated successfully. Seeing your doctor is the first step.



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Peptic ulcers occur in the wall of the stomach and duodenum.

\*Words in **bold** type are defined in the glossary on page 13.

## What are the symptoms of peptic ulcers?

A burning pain in the gut is the most common symptom. The pain

- feels like a dull ache
- comes and goes for a few days or weeks
- starts 2 to 3 hours after a meal
- comes in the middle of the night when your stomach is empty
- usually goes away after you eat



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A burning pain in the gut is a common symptom of peptic ulcers.

Other symptoms are

- losing weight
- not feeling like eating
- having pain while eating
- feeling sick to your stomach
- vomiting

Some people with peptic ulcers have mild symptoms. If you have any of these symptoms, you may have a peptic ulcer and should see your doctor.

## What causes peptic ulcers?

Peptic ulcers are caused by

- bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori*, or *H. pylori* for short
- nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as aspirin and ibuprofen
- other diseases

Your body makes strong acids that digest food. A lining protects the inside of your stomach and duodenum from these acids. If the lining breaks down, the acids can damage the walls. Both *H. pylori* and NSAIDs weaken the lining so acid can reach the stomach or duodenal wall.



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Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can cause peptic ulcers.

*H. pylori* causes almost two-thirds of all ulcers. Many people have *H. pylori* infections. But not everyone who has an infection will develop a peptic ulcer.

Most other ulcers are caused by NSAIDs. Only rarely do other diseases cause ulcers.

## Do stress or spicy foods cause peptic ulcers?

No, neither stress nor spicy foods cause ulcers. But they can make ulcers worse. Drinking alcohol or smoking can make ulcers worse, too.



## What increases my risk of getting peptic ulcers?

You're more likely to develop a peptic ulcer if you

- have an *H. pylori* infection
- use NSAIDs often
- smoke cigarettes
- drink alcohol
- have relatives who have peptic ulcers
- are 50 years old or older



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Having relatives with peptic ulcers puts you at risk of having them too.

## Can peptic ulcers get worse?

Peptic ulcers will get worse if they aren't treated. Call your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms:

- sudden sharp pain that doesn't go away
- black or bloody stools
- bloody vomit or vomit that looks like coffee grounds

These could be signs that

- the ulcer has gone through, or perforated, the stomach or duodenal wall
- the ulcer has broken a blood vessel
- the ulcer has stopped food from moving from the stomach into the duodenum

These symptoms must be treated quickly. You may need surgery.



Call your doctor if the pain gets worse.

## How can I find out whether I have peptic ulcers?

If you have symptoms, see your doctor. Your doctor may

- take x rays of your stomach and duodenum, called an upper GI series. You'll drink a liquid called **barium** to make your stomach and duodenum show up clearly on the x rays.
- use a thin lighted tube with a tiny camera on the end to look at the inside of your stomach and duodenum. This procedure is called an **endoscopy**. You'll take some medicine to relax you so your doctor can pass the thin tube through your mouth to your stomach and duodenum. Your doctor may also remove a tiny piece of your stomach to view under a microscope. This procedure is called a **biopsy**.



If you do have a peptic ulcer, your doctor may test your breath, blood, or tissue to see whether bacteria caused the ulcer.

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Peptic ulcers can show up on x rays.

## How are peptic ulcers treated?

Peptic ulcers can be cured. Medicines for peptic ulcers are

- proton pump inhibitors or histamine receptor blockers to stop your stomach from making acids
- antibiotics to kill the bacteria

Depending on your symptoms, you may take one or more of these medicines for a few weeks. They'll stop the pain and help heal your stomach or duodenum.

Ulcers take time to heal. Take your medicines even if the pain goes away. If these medicines make you feel sick or dizzy, or cause diarrhea or headaches, your doctor can change your medicines.

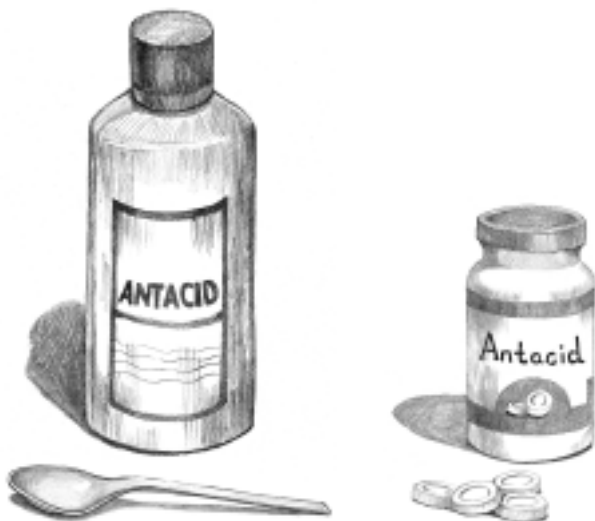
If NSAIDs caused your peptic ulcer, you'll need to stop taking them. If you smoke, quit. Smoking slows healing of ulcers.

## Can I use antacids?

Yes. If you have a peptic ulcer, taking antacids will

- stop the acids from working and reduce the pain
- help ulcers heal

You can buy antacids at any grocery store or drug-store. But you must take them several times a day. Also, antacids don't kill the bacteria, so your ulcer could come back even if the pain goes away.



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Antacids can reduce pain and help ulcers heal.

## Can peptic ulcers come back?

Yes. If you stop taking your antibiotic too soon, not all the bacteria will be gone and not all the sores will be healed. If you still smoke or take NSAIDs, your ulcers may come back.

## What happens if peptic ulcers don't heal? Will I need surgery?

In many cases, medicine heals ulcers. You may need surgery if your ulcers

- don't heal
- keep coming back
- perforate, bleed, or obstruct the stomach or duodenum (see page 7)

Surgery can

- remove the ulcers
- reduce the amount of acid your stomach makes

## What can I do to prevent peptic ulcers?

- Stop using NSAIDs. Talk with your doctor about other pain relievers.



## What can I do to lower my risk of getting peptic ulcers?

- Don't smoke.
- Don't drink alcohol.



## Glossary

**Barium** (BAIR-ee-um): A chalky liquid used to coat the inside of organs so that they will show up on an x ray.

**Biopsy** (BYE-op-see): Removing a small piece of tissue to view under a microscope.

**Duodenum** (doo-AW-deh-num): The first part of your small intestine, right after your stomach.

**Endoscopy** (en-DAH-skoh-pee): A test to look inside the stomach and small intestine. The doctor uses a thin, flexible tube that contains a light and a tiny video camera. This device is called an endoscope.

***Helicobacter pylori*** (HELL-ih-koh-BAK-tur py-LOH-ree): A bacterium that can damage stomach and duodenal tissue, causing ulcers. It is known as *H. pylori* for short.

## For More Information

You can get information about peptic ulcers from the

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

1600 Clifton Road

Atlanta, GA 30333

Phone: 1-888-MY-ULCER or (404) 639-3534

Internet: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)



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The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

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