

Peptic Ulcers

A peptic ulcer is a sore on the inside wall of the stomach or duodenum—the upper portion of the small intestine. More specifically, ulcers that develop in the stomach are called gastric ulcers, and ulcers that develop in the duodenum are called duodenal ulcers. Both seem to be caused by excess peptic acid (a secretion that normally aids digestion), but other factors are probably involved as well.

The main symptom of an ulcer is central abdominal pain, which usually begins an hour or two after eating or in the middle of the night. Sometimes, ulcers will cause nausea or vomiting. Since ulcers will often bleed internally, blood can also be present in the stools or vomit. If this is the case, the stools will appear black and tar-like and the vomit will have specks of blood that will resemble coffee grounds. An ulcer's symptoms will often persist for days or weeks, and many ulcers will flare up (on and off) for years. Without treatment, an ulcer may cause more significant problems, such as a hole in the stomach lining or an obstruction. It is possible to bleed to death from an ulcer.

Habits that can lead to an ulcer include smoking, drinking excess alcohol, or taking aspirin or other anti-inflammatory medications. Such anti-inflammatory medications include ibuprofen, as well as other arthritis or back pain medications, for example. Some ulcers are thought to be caused by a bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori*, which can live in the stomach for years. In fact, about 95 percent of patients with duodenal ulcers test positive for *Helicobacter pylori*. Curing the infection helps the ulcer heal, and prevents recurrences. Stress is no longer believed to be a direct cause of ulcers, although it is believed to contribute to common indigestion.

If you think you have an ulcer, you should call your medical professional to schedule an appointment for an evaluation. In the meantime, here are five suggestions that may help your condition:

1. If you smoke, stop.
2. Consider using acetaminophen instead of aspirin or ibuprofen or other pain medication.
3. Avoid foods that seem to cause symptoms.
4. Eliminate alcohol, caffeine, and spicy foods if they make your symptoms worse.
5. Consider taking liquid antacids in doses recommended by your medical professional. These might include Maalox, Mylanta, or Gelusil. If you're on a low salt diet, make sure you talk with your pharmacist before choosing an antacid. Some antacids have a high sodium content.

Call your medical professional immediately if the pain localizes to one area of the abdomen, or if you experience shortness of breath, vomiting, fever, or if your stools are deep red, black, or tar-like. You should also call if symptoms persist after two weeks of home treatment; your medical professional may want to test for *Helicobacter pylori* or for other conditions.

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- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.

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