



# Internally Yours<sup>®</sup>

A Publication  
of Atlanta South  
Gastroenterology, P.C.

[www.AtlantaSouthGastro.com](http://www.AtlantaSouthGastro.com)

[www.EndoAtlas.com](http://www.EndoAtlas.com)

## PEPTIC ULCER DISEASE

**A**n ulcer is a sore, or raw area, in the lining of some part of the intestinal tract. Peptic ulcers typically occur in either the **stomach** or in the **duodenum**, which is the first several inches of the small intestine just below the stomach.

The exact cause of all ulcers is unclear, but appears to involve the combined effects of stomach acid, digestive enzymes, irritating medications, in some cases possibly bile, and in many cases a bacterial infection caused by an organism named **Helicobacter pylori**.

The typical symptom of an ulcer is pain. Ulcer pain is often described as burning, or as a gnawing, hunger-like sensation in the upper abdomen. Alternatively, the pain may be located in the upper chest, or radiate into the back. Ulcer pain is often most intense when the stomach is empty, because there is nothing present to neutralize stomach acid, which induces pain when it comes into contact with the ulcer. Pain is then relieved by eating or by taking an antacid. In other cases, however, especially with an ulcer in the stomach, eating may make the pain worse because eating causes the stomach to produce more acid.

Additional symptoms of an ulcer may include nausea, loss of appetite, bloating after meals, and vomiting.

Ulcers occur in over 10 percent of the population, and tend to be more common in men than in women. Cigarette smoking, heavy alcohol use, and the use of irritating medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen and other arthritis drugs, all seem to increase the risk of developing an ulcer. Emotional stress and irregular, hurried meals may also play a role.

Complications from ulcers, other than pain, are rare. Bleeding from ulcers may be slow and unnoticed, leading to the development of anemia. Sudden, heavy bleeding may cause the vomiting of blood, or the passage of black, tarry

stools. Massive bleeding may cause shock and is a medical emergency.

Less commonly, an ulcer may erode completely through the wall of the stomach or duodenum. This perforation requires immediate surgery, and can be life-threatening.

If you think you may have an ulcer, you may obtain relief by taking antacids or over-the-counter medications such as Tagamet-HB, Zantac-75, Pepcid AC, or Prilosec OTC. Avoiding cigarettes, alcohol and medications such as aspirin and ibuprofen will also help. Many ulcers may be healed by this approach.

If symptoms worsen or persist beyond several days, however, consult your physician. Tests such as endoscopy or x-rays may be indicated to obtain a diagnosis and to ensure that a more serious condition, such as cancer, is not present.

Medical therapy may consist of the prescription strength of one of the same drugs available over-the-counter, or more likely, a stronger agent such as Protonix, Prevacid, Aciphex or Nexium.

Ulcers caused by *Helicobacter pylori* will be treated with a combination of ulcer medication plus usually two antibiotics for a total of 7-14 days, often followed by continuation of the ulcer medication for a variable period of time.

Nowadays, patients with ulcers are generally not advised to restrict their diet, other than to avoid any specific foods which worsen seem to their symptoms. A “bland” or “ulcer” diet, which used to be prescribed before ulcer medications became available, is no longer recommended. In all cases, however, tobacco products, alcoholic beverages and irritating medications such as aspirin and ibuprofen, should be avoided in order to accelerate healing and reduce the risk of ulcer recurrence.

