

Peptic Ulcer Disease

What is Peptic Ulcer Disease?

Peptic Ulcer Disease (PUD for short) is the term used to describe wounds or sores that develop in the lining of the stomach (gastric ulcers) or in the lining of the upper part of the small intestine (duodenal ulcers).

These ulcers can not only be uncomfortable causing you pain, but can also lead to other complications that may be dangerous. Ulcers can heal of their own accord but in the majority of people who do not get treatment, the ulcers tend to recur.

How did I get Peptic Ulcer Disease?

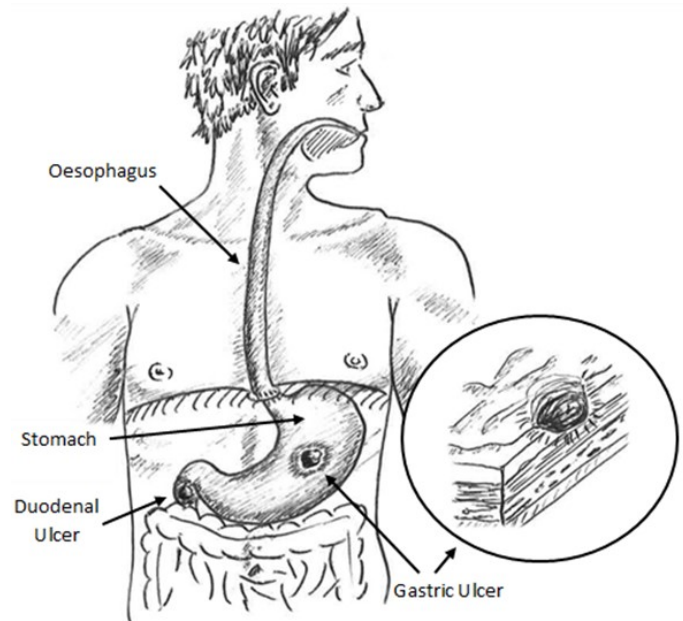
The stomach produces very strong acid that it uses to allow you to digest your food. Usually the stomach is able to protect itself from this acid by maintaining a shield of mucous between itself and the acid but some things weaken the protective mucous shield allowing acid to leak through and start eroding the wall of the stomach.

There are a number of causes including:

- Bacterial Infection – Helicobacter Pylori (H. Pylori)
- Smoking
- Pain Medications
- Alcohol
- Family History
- Occasionally other medical conditions and medications that can contribute to the development of ulcers – check with your doctor.

What problems can Peptic Ulcer Disease cause?

It is important to realise that most peptic ulcers will heal completely with treatment. Occasionally people will get complications from their ulcers that can be quite serious and require urgent medical treatment.



These include:

- Bleeding – If the ulcer erodes into a blood vessel this can cause bleeding. This can range from slight and intermittent bleeding through to heavy bleeding that may be life threatening. If the bleeding is slight it may only be detected in blood tests. If the bleeding is heavy this can lead to the vomiting of blood or blood in the bowel motions. It is important to monitor for blood in your faeces which can either appear red or black and tar-like (digested blood). Any significant bleeding requires urgent medical assessment as you may need a blood transfusion, an endoscopy (internal camera) or occasionally an operation to address the bleeding.
- Perforation – Sometimes the ulcer can erode completely through the wall of the bowel causing leakage of the stomach acid into the abdomen. This is a medical emergency and you must immediately attend your local Emergency Department. Symptoms may include sudden severe abdominal pain which be referred up into your shoulders and you will likely feel very unwell with difficulty tolerating any movement.

Other complications from ulcers are much less common and include scarring of the bowel leading to obstruction.

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How do I find out if I have Peptic Ulcer Disease?

Your doctor may make a diagnosis of gastric ulcers based on your symptoms however will likely arrange for additional testing to determine if there are any causes of the ulcers that may be able to be treated.

Endoscopy is a procedure that is used to both investigate the presence and type of ulcers as well as a means of treating bleeding ulcers. It is a simple procedure, usually taking less than 15 minutes, where after a light sedation, a tiny camera on the end of a flexible tube is passed down into your oesophagus and then into your stomach. Small tissue samples or biopsies may be taken if needed as well as testing for the presence of H Pylori. If there are any bleeding ulcers or exposed blood vessels these may be treated by cauterization, injection or banding as required.

Your doctor may also organise for you to have an H Pylori breath test.

There are a number of medical conditions that mimic the symptoms of Peptic Ulcer Disease. Your doctor may arrange further tests to look at other potential causes for your symptoms.

Instructions:

Seeking help:



In a medical emergency go to your nearest emergency department or call 000.

What treatments are available?

The most effective way of treating ulcers is with the prescription medications called Proton Pump inhibitors which reduce the amount of acid that your stomach produces. These are effective at both helping your pain as well as allowing for the healing of ulcers and erosions that may have developed.

Your doctor will advise you of what to do if you were previously taking anti-inflammatory medications – don't make changes to your medications without discussing it with your doctor.

In addition to the above, there are a number of steps you can take to help yourself including:

- Stop smoking. Stopping smoking will likely improve your symptoms.
- Eat a well-balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and an adequate intake of iron.
- You may find that some foods make your pain / symptoms worse and if so avoid these. Some people report that fatty meals, alcohol, tomatoes, spicy foods, coffee, chocolate and hot drinks make their symptoms worse.
- Lose weight if you are overweight
- Try to avoid alcohol at least in the first few weeks as the alcohol can impair ulcer healing and then only resume alcohol at safe levels
- Taking antacids from the chemist can also help with immediate relief of symptoms but they tend to recur quite quickly afterwards. Speak to your local pharmacist. Some examples include Mylanta, Quick-Eze and Ranitidine.

It is best to speak to your doctor to determine the best treatment and follow-up plan for you.

