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# Peptic Ulcer Disease

## Peptic Ulcer Overview

Peptic ulcers are sores or eroded areas that form in the lining of the digestive tract. They usually occur in the stomach or duodenum (the upper region of the small intestine). Peptic ulcers affect more than 4.6 million people each year in the United States. Most ulcers heal while others worsen over time. Complications of peptic ulcers can be serious or even life-threatening. Fortunately, most people who develop peptic ulcers can be treated successfully and avoid long-term problems.

### How Ulcers Develop:

The two primary causes of peptic ulcers are infection with a specific bacteria (*Helicobacter Pylori*) and use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications (such as Ibuprofen and Aleve) and aspirin. Both can cause changes in the protective mucous layer of the digestive tract. If the mucous layer is damaged or if acid neutralizing substances are not present in normal amounts, digestive juices can cause irritation and breakdown of the stomach or duodenal lining, allowing an ulcer to form.

### Peptic Ulcer Symptoms:

People with peptic ulcers may have a wide variety of symptoms or experience no symptoms at all. Symptoms may include pain or discomfort (usually in the upper abdomen), bloating, an early sense of fullness when eating, lack of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and blood in stools. Moderate to severe bleeding can cause foul-smelling black or tarry stools. The risk of serious complications depends on the cause of the ulcer, the size and location, and the person's age and health. Peptic ulcers can lead to potentially life-threatening complications such as bleeding, perforation of the stomach or duodenum, and obstruction.

## Peptic Ulcer Diagnosis:

Ulcers can often be diagnosed through upper endoscopy (EGD). A small sample of tissue is taken to be checked for H. Pylori, abnormal cells, and cancer. Not everyone with ulcer symptoms has an ulcer. Similar symptoms can be caused by a wide variety of conditions such as functional dyspepsia (the presence of ulcer-symptoms without a specific cause), abnormal emptying of the stomach, acid reflux, gallbladder problems, and, much less commonly, stomach cancer. Thus, the process needed to diagnose an ulcer depends upon the person's medical history and sometimes, the use of specific tests.

## Peptic Ulcer Treatment:

Most ulcers can be healed with medications. The initial step in treating an ulcer is to identify the cause. NSAIDs should be stopped, regardless of the cause. People who have H. Pylori are treated with antibiotics and a medication that reduces acid production. Repeat endoscopy may be necessary to ensure the ulcers have healed following treatment. Surgery is rarely needed, except when complications develop.

