

## HELICOBACTER PYLORI INFECTION AND ULCERS

*Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*), an intestinal bacterium, causes the majority of ulcers in the stomach and *duodenum* (first part of the small intestine). Normally the high acid concentration in the digestive tract prevents bacteria from surviving in this environment. *H. pylori*, however, lives in the digestive tract lining where it is protected from the body's defense system. The *inflammation* (swelling, pain, redness, and warmth) of the tissues caused by *H. pylori* then contributes to the breakdown of the lining. This breakdown eventually produces an ulcer. Researchers believe that the bacteria are most likely transmitted orally by contact with food or water sources that are contaminated with feces. Risk increases with a family history of ulcers; exposure to contaminated sources; poor sanitation; and crowded living conditions.

### Symptoms *may* include:

- Sometimes none
- Abdominal pain, a burning sensation in stomach, heartburn and increased burping
- Pain that is often mistaken for heartburn, indigestion, or hunger
- Pain immediately or hours after eating; intermittent; or wakes person from sleep
- Poor appetite, nausea, vomiting and weight loss
- Pain relief after eating, drinking milk or taking antacids.
- Internal bleeding, *blood in the stools* (black, tarry-looking), vomiting blood, and chest pain

### What *your doctor* can do:

- Diagnose the disease by asking about your symptoms, doing a physical exam, and ordering laboratory blood tests, stool cultures and an *endoscopy* (using a long, thin, flexible tube with a light and optics to view and take tissue samples of the digestive tract lining)
- Order additional tests like a breath test and x-rays with *radioactive isotopes* (radioactive substances that may be taken orally or injected into the blood stream.) to detect *H. Pylori*.
- Prescribe antibiotics with bismuth (Pepto Bismol®) to cure the *H. Pylori* infection and various other anti-ulcer medicines like *Antacids* (neutralize excess acid), *Histamine Antagonists* (decrease acid production), and *Protective Agents* (cover the ulcer site to allow healing).

### What *you* can do:

- Finish all the antibiotics and take the ulcer medicines as directed by your doctor even if you start feeling better. Remember that ulcers can recur in the future without proper treatment.
- Practice good hand washing especially after using the bathroom and prior to handling food.
- Stop smoking and avoid caffeine (e.g., coffee, colas, caffeinated teas) and alcohol.
- Eat small, frequent meals instead of 3 large or heavy meals.
- Do not use aspirin or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines. Use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) for fever symptoms or minor discomfort.
- Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 1-888-MY-ULCER (1-888-698-5237) for more information.

### What *you* can expect:

- Most people recover within a 2-3 weeks after starting antibiotic therapy.
- Some medicines may cause side effects like nausea; diarrhea; or a black tongue and stools.
- Possible complications may include a tear in the lining, peritonitis, excessive bleeding, an obstruction in the small intestine, chronic ulcers, and even stomach cancer.

**Contact your doctor** if you develop symptoms of an ulcer, if you suffer symptoms of an infection (fever, increased pain), or if you start to vomit blood or notice blood in your stool.