

## **H-pylori Ulcers Can Be Treated!**

Until recently people with stomach ulcers were given an acid-blocking medicine such as Tagamet or Pepcid and put on a bland diet. Spicy and acidic foods, alcohol, coffee and tobacco were forbidden.

We no longer blame ulcers on lifestyles. Diet no-nos are no longer prescribed as a cure, though unhealthy choices and stress can make you more susceptible to ulcers.

We now know that most gastric and duodenal ulcers are caused by bacteria called *Helicobacter pylori* (H-pylori, for short). Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID'S) such as ibuprofen and aspirin also frequently cause these ulcers. Zollinger-Ellison Syndrome, gastric cancer and Crohn's Disease can also cause ulcers.

A gastric, peptic or duodenal ulcer is an open sore in the digestive tract (stomach or small intestine). A gastric ulcer involves the gastric mucous lining, and a duodenal ulcer is located in the duodenum, the valve between the stomach and the small intestine. A peptic ulcer involves the secretion of acid and a digestive enzyme called pepsin.

An ulcer is similar to a scrape on the knee that just won't heal. Each time you eat, acid and digestive juices are secreted in the stomach which then causes pepsin to be produced. These ingredients work together to corrode the walls of the stomach, intestine and even the esophagus to create sores.

Normally these sores heal quickly. But when you are infected with the H-pylori, the bacteria corkscrews its way through the protective mucous layer in your stomach and attaches itself to the lining and acid-worn sites.

Before the discovery of the H-pylori, it was thought stomach acid and pepsin production killed all bacteria in the stomach. Now we know this particular bacteria neutralizes the acid surrounding it, then sets into a protective shield. This enables it to live in the highly acidic environment of the digestive tract. Researchers believe the bacteria might interfere with the stomach's normal healing process.

H-pylori is a mobile bacteria found more commonly in the lower socio-economic environments, though it can occur in anyone. Overcrowded conditions, poor hygiene and unclean surroundings encourage its spread. Some studies show that 60% of our population has H-pylori. It is probably spread by fecal contamination, which can happen when a food handler has not washed his/her hands after using the bathroom. Most people are infected as children and symptoms usually don't show up for years.

Men are more often diagnosed than women, and the frequency of infected persons increase with age. Some reports say people of Hispanic descent are more often affected, as are those with type O blood.

There is still a great deal of controversy regarding how and when to test for and treat ulcers. One opinion is to perform a serum blood test on patients with ulcer symptoms and treat only those who have H-pylori. The National Institute of Health

recommends treating only patients with a positive diagnosis for ulcers and h-pylori as determined by an upper GI series (X-rays taken after swallowing barium) and endoscopy (a tube with a camera that is inserted into the intestine).

Treatments can include prescribing different combinations of antacid tablets, acid blockers and antibiotics. Although these treatments involve a lot of pills and can be expensive, following the regimen exactly as prescribed ensures success. A month after treatment a urea breath test should be done to verify the H-pylori are gone.

Herbal or naturalistic treatment of ulcers includes the use of cayenne pepper and licorice root, among other things. Since the population of Thailand has little or no H-pylori-caused stomach ulcers, this has led to the belief that eating cayenne pepper is an effective H-pylori preventive. Thai children begin eating small amounts of cayenne pepper when very young and increase their intake as they age. Some studies say cayenne kills the bacteria and stimulates mucous lining development in the stomach and intestine.

Another herbal remedy is licorice root made into a tea. Unlike cayenne, patients do not need to build up a tolerance to the licorice tea. It is reported to be instantly soothing for ulcer pain. Herbal specialists say it helps kill the H-pylori bacteria.

I am reluctant to recommend herbal remedies without more research to find out if they are safe and effective.