

REVIEWED**By Chris at 11:36 am, Sep 18, 2019**

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Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) infection

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Overview

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Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) infection occurs when a type of bacteria called Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) infects your stomach. This usually happens during childhood. A common cause of peptic ulcers, H. pylori infection may be present in more than half the people in the world.

Most people don't realize they have H. pylori infection, because they never get sick from it. If you develop signs and symptoms of a peptic ulcer, your doctor will probably test you for H. pylori infection. If you have H. pylori infection, it can be treated with antibiotics.

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Symptoms

Most people with H. pylori infection will never have any signs or symptoms. It's not clear why this is, but some people may be born with more resistance to the harmful effects of H. pylori.

When signs or symptoms do occur with H. pylori infection, they may include:

- An ache or burning pain in your abdomen
- Abdominal pain that's worse when your stomach is empty
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Frequent burping
- Bloating
- Unintentional weight loss

When to see a doctor

Make an appointment with your doctor if you notice any persistent signs and symptoms that worry you. Seek immediate medical help if you experience:

- Severe or persistent abdominal pain
- Difficulty swallowing
- Bloody or black tarry stools
- Bloody or black vomit or vomit that looks like coffee grounds

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Causes

The exact way H. pylori infects someone is still unknown. H. pylori bacteria may be passed from person to person through direct contact

with saliva, vomit or fecal matter. H. pylori may also be spread through contaminated food or water.

Risk factors

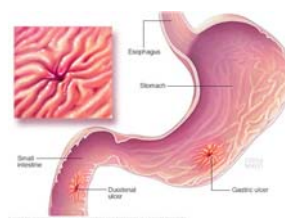
H. pylori is often contracted in childhood. Risk factors for H. pylori infection are related to living conditions in your childhood, such as:

- **Living in crowded conditions.** You have a greater risk of H. pylori infection if you live in a home with many other people.
- **Living without a reliable supply of clean water.** Having a reliable supply of clean, running water helps reduce the risk of H. pylori.
- **Living in a developing country.** People living in developing countries, where crowded and unsanitary living conditions may be more common, have a higher risk of H. pylori infection.
- **Living with someone who has an H. pylori infection.** If someone you live with has H. pylori, you're more likely to also have H. pylori.

Complications

Complications associated with H. pylori infection include:

- **Ulcers.** H. pylori can damage the protective lining of your stomach and small intestine. This can allow stomach acid to create an open sore (ulcer). About 10 percent of people with H. pylori will develop an ulcer.
- **Inflammation of the stomach lining.** H. pylori infection can irritate your stomach, causing inflammation (gastritis).
- **Stomach cancer.** H. pylori infection is a strong risk factor for certain types of stomach cancer.



Ulcers

A peptic ulcer is a sore on the lining of your stomach, small intestine or esophagus.

A peptic ulcer in the stomach is called a gastric ulcer. A duodenal ulcer is a peptic ulcer that develops in the first part of the small intestine (duodenum). An esophageal ulcer occurs in the lower part of your esophagus.

Prevention

In areas of the world where H. pylori infection and its complications are common, doctors sometimes test healthy people for H. pylori. Whether there is a benefit to treating H. pylori when you have no signs or symptoms of infection is controversial among doctors.

If you're concerned about H. pylori infection or think you may have a high risk of stomach cancer, talk to your doctor. Together you can decide whether you may benefit from H. pylori screening.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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