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Peptic ulcer

Peptic ulcer:

Peptic ulcers are open sores that develop on the inside lining of your stomach and the upper portion of your small intestine, and in most cases, stomach pain is the most common symptom of a peptic ulcer.

Until recently, it was believed that stress and lifestyle choices (such as eating spicy food) were among the main causes of peptic ulcers. However, it turns out that a bacterial infection and the use of certain medications (not stress or diet) are actually the main cause of most gastric and duodenal ulcers. Esophageal ulcers, on the other hand, can be attributed to gastric acid reflux (when stomach acid flows back into the esophagus)m this is known as gastroesophageal reflux disease.

Peptic ulcers are among the most common diseases in the world, but the good news is that peptic ulcers are now treatable.

Symptoms:

The most common peptic ulcer symptom is burning stomach pain, and the cause of this pain is ulceration in the mucous membranes themselves. The contact of stomach acids with the ulcer itself is what makes the pain worse.

Ulcer pain is characterized by the following:

1. It is located in the upper abdomen area just below rib cage and above the navel.
2. The pain may last between minutes to several hours.
3. The pain may get worse between meals when the stomach is empty.
4. Occasionally, patients have been known to wake up in the middle of the night due to nagging pain.
5. The pain can often be relieved by eating certain foods that buffer stomach acid or by taking an acid-reducing medication.

6. Symptoms usually disappear for several days to several weeks only to reappear again after a while in a recurring cycle of pain.

Symptoms and signs of severe peptic ulcers include:

1. Vomiting blood which may appear red or black due to bleeding ulcers.
2. Dark blood in stools, or stools that are black or tarry.
3. Nausea or vomiting.
4. Loss of appetite
5. Unexplained weight loss.

See your doctor as soon as possible if you have any of the severe signs or symptoms listed above. Over-the-counter antacids and acid blockers may relieve your pain but they do not address the cause.

Types of peptic ulcers:

Types of peptic ulcers vary based on their location in the body, and they include:

1. Gastric ulcers that occur on the inside of the stomach.
2. Duodenal ulcers that occur on the inside of the upper portion of the small intestine (duodenum).
3. Esophageal ulcers which usually occur at the bottom of the esophagus and are associated with gastroesophageal reflux disease.

The main causes of ulcers:

In most cases, the main causes of ulcers include:

1. The presence of a bacterium called Helicobacter pylori.
2. Smoking has been found to increase the secretion and concentration of gastric acid, thus increasing the risk of ulcers. Smoking also slows the healing process of sores during treatment.

3. In case the Helicobacter pylori tests come back negative, then the other most likely factor for peptic ulcers is the use of painkillers such as NSAIDs, which the patient should stop using.
4. If the patient is proven not to use these drugs, then the cause is often acid reflux.

Complications:

Failure to treat peptic ulcers may put the patient at risk of internal bleeding and open sores may continue to form on the lining of the stomach or small intestine until it is punctured after which the patient is at risk of peritonitis. Peptic ulcers may also result in a blockage in the digestive tract due to the swelling of the area affected by the ulcer, which causes a feeling of early satiety accompanied by frequent vomiting and weight loss.

Treatments and medications:

Many peptic ulcers are caused by a Helicobacter pylori infection, therefore, treatment is usually aimed at achieving the following two goals:

1. Eliminating the bacteria.
2. Reducing acid production in the digestive tract by relieving pain and accelerating the healing of peptic ulcers.

To achieve these two goals, several types of medications are usually used, such as:

1. Antibiotics:

Doctors use a combination of antibiotics to treat an H. pylori infection because the use of a single antibiotic is not enough to kill this type of bacteria, and in order for the treatment to be successful, medication must be taken according to the doctor's instructions.

Some pharmaceutical companies may manufacture a combination of medications to treat H. pylori bacteria such as combining antibiotics together

by adding proton-pump inhibitor drugs (these drugs prevent acid-generating cells in the lining of the stomach from doing their job, which reduces the amount of acid in the stomach).

2. Acid blockers:

Also called antihistamines, these drugs reduce the amount of stomach acid that is released to the digestive system, which reduces the pain of the ulcer and accelerates its recovery, and they are available in pharmacies in the form of over the counter drugs and prescription drugs.

3. Antacids:

The doctor might add an antacid to the list of medications that are prescribed to the patient along with or instead of an acid blocker, and instead of reducing the secretion of stomach acid, antacids neutralize existing stomach acid and can provide rapid pain relief.

4. Proton pump inhibitors:

This method reduces the amount of secreted gastric acid and relies on the closure of proton pumps in cells that secrete gastric acid. This class of drugs are only given with prescription.

Chronic ulcers:

Some ulcers persist for long periods of time without healing; this occurs due to several reasons, such as:

- Not complying with the doctor's instructions and the specified doses of treatment.
- Some types of bacteria are resistant to antibiotics.
- Continuous smoking during treatment, which slows down the healing process of ulcers.
- Continued use of NSAIDs.

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Other rare causes of chronic ulcers include:

- Zollinger-Ellison syndrome, which causes a steady increase in the secretion of stomach acid due to excessive secretion of certain hormones.
- Other infections in the stomach or digestive system.
- Other digestive diseases, including cancers.

What can a patient do to help accelerate the healing process of peptic ulcers?

1. Avoid spicy foods (pickles, pepper ... etc).
2. Avoid smoking in order to ward off the effects of nicotine on the lining of the stomach and intestines.
3. Avoid excessive use of painkillers such as NSAIDs, and if necessary, then use Panadol.
4. Control gastric acid reflux by: avoiding spicy and fatty foods, and avoiding leaning back after meals for at least 3 hours.

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