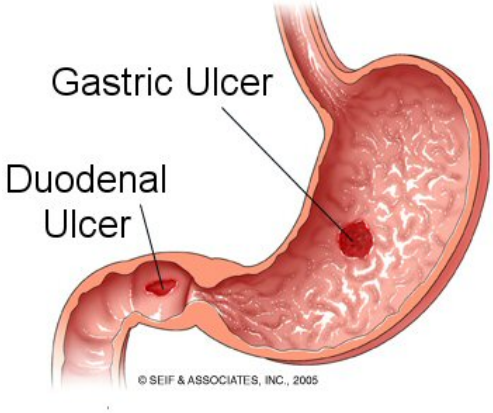
Ulcers of the Gastrointestinal Tract
(Duodenal, Small Bowel)

You have an ulcer or are likely to get ulcers more often than most people. An ulcer is a break or hole in the lining of the esophagus (food tube from the mouth to the stomach), stomach, or the first part of the small bowel.

CAUSES

- Germs (*bacteria*). There is a bacterium related to ulcers called Helicobacter Pylori.
- Medications such as the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications.
- Cigarette smoking is related to ulcers and it does not help them heal.

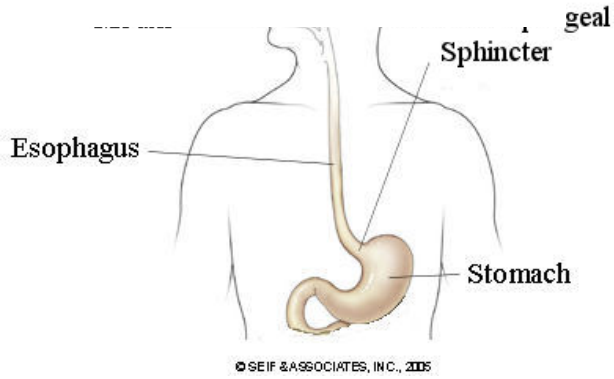


The exact cause of ulcers is uncertain. Most likely, they are due to an upset between the balance of:

1. The acids produced by the stomach and
2. The protective mechanisms that protect our bowel against the acid.

SYMPTOMS

- Burning or gnawing of the mid upper belly (*abdomen*). This is usually relieved with food or antacids.
- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*).
- Bloating.
- Vomiting.
- If the ulcer results in bleeding, it can cause:
  - Black tarry stools.
  - Vomiting of bright red blood.
- With severe bleeding, there may be:
  - Loss of consciousness and shock.
  - Vomiting coffee ground looking materials.



DIAGNOSIS

Learning what is wrong (*diagnosis*) is usually made with x-rays (*barium studies*) and upper GI (*gastrointestinal*) endoscopy. With *endoscopy*, a flexible tube is used to look at the esophagus, stomach, and small bowel. Abnormal areas may be *biopsied*. This is when a small piece of tissue is removed to look at under a microscope. In young people, it is safe to treat without studies (barium x-rays, for example) and to use diagnostic studies on those who do not respond.

TREATMENT

- Avoid tobacco, alcohol, and foods that seem to make your pain worse. Tobacco use will slow the healing process.
- Take other medications as directed. Your caregiver may prescribe medications known as H_2 blockers that cut down on the production of acid. Other medications are available that protect the lining of the bowel.
- Continue regular work and usual activities unless told otherwise by your caregiver.

If you failed to respond to the usual ulcer treatments, ask your caregiver if antibiotics are a consideration. These are medications that kill germs.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

You develop

- Bright red bleeding.
- Vomit blood.
- Become light-headed, weak.
- Have fainting episodes.
- Become sweaty, cold and clammy.
- You have severe abdominal pain not controlled by medications. **Do not take pain medications unless told by your caregiver.**

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