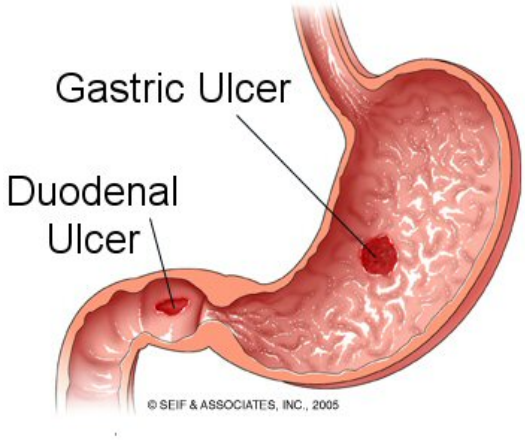
Peptic Ulcers

Ulcers are small, open craters or sores that develop in the lining of the stomach or the *duodenum* (the first part of the small intestine). The term *peptic ulcer* is used to describe both types of ulcers. There are a number of treatments that relieve the discomfort of ulcers. In most cases ulcers do heal.



CAUSES AND COMMON FEATURES OF PEPTIC ULCERS

Peptic ulcers occur only in areas of the digestive system that come in contact with digestive juices. These juices are *secreted* (given off) by the stomach. They include acid and an enzyme called pepsin that breaks down proteins. Many people with *duodenal ulcers* have too much digestive juice spilling down from the stomach. Most people with *gastric (stomach) ulcers* have normal or below normal amounts of stomach acid. Sometimes, when the *mucous membrane* (protective lining) of the stomach and duodenum does not protect well, this may add to the growth of ulcers.

Duodenal ulcers often produces pain in a small area between the breastbone and navel. Pain varies from hunger pain to constant gnawing or burning *sensations* (feeling). Sometimes the pain is felt during sleep and may awaken the person in the middle of the night. Often the pain occurs two or three hours after eating, when the stomach is empty. Other common *symptoms* (problems) include overeating for pain relief. Eating relieves the pain of a duodenal ulcer.

Gastric ulcer pain may be felt in the same place as the pain of a duodenal ulcer, or slightly higher up. There may also be sensations of feeling full, indigestion, and heartburn. Sometimes pain occurs when the stomach is full. This causes loss of appetite followed by weight loss.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Use of tobacco products have been found to slow down the healing of an ulcer. STOP SMOKING.
- Avoid alcohol, aspirin, and other *inflammation* (swelling and soreness) reducing drugs. These substances weaken the stomach lining.
- Eat regular, nutritious meals.
- Avoid foods that bother you.
- Take medications and antacids as directed. Over-the-counter medications are used to neutralize stomach acid. Prescription medications reduce acid secretion, block acid production, or provide a protective coating over the ulcer. **If a specific antacid was prescribed, do not switch brands without your caregiver's approval.**

Surgery is usually not necessary. Diet and/or drug therapy usually is effective. Surgery may be necessary if perforation, obstruction due to scarring, or uncontrollable bleeding is found, or if severe pain is not otherwise controlled.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION IF:

- You see signs of bleeding. This includes vomiting fresh, bright red blood or passing bloody or tarry, black stools.
- You suffer weakness, fatigue, or loss of consciousness. These symptoms can result from severe *hemorrhaging* (bleeding). Shock may result.
- You have sudden, intense, severe *abdominal* (belly) pain. This is the first sign of a perforation. This would require immediate surgical treatment.
- You have intense pain and continued vomiting. This could signal an obstruction of the digestive tract.

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