



Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) infection

Overview

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.

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

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.

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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