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Endoscopy

Gastrointestinal Medicine

Nutrition



The Centre for GI Health

ULCERS

Ulcers of the stomach, (gastric ulcers) and duodenum (duodenal ulcers) are collectively referred to as peptic ulcers and are quite common. Up to one in every five people may develop an ulcer at some stage in their life time, (10 - 15% for duodenal ulcers, 4 or 5% for gastric ulcers).

Whilst ulcers may be asymptomatic, they often cause indigestion and stomach pains. Rarely they may bleed or perforate.

They are caused when acid and pepsin (digestive juices produced by the stomach) overcome the natural defences of the stomach or duodenal lining. The lining may have been weakened by the effects of an infection called Helicobacter pylori or medications such as those used for arthritis (eg: non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or aspirin).

It often surprises people to hear that an infection might be the underlying cause of ulcers, yet, the organism Helicobacter pylori - found in the stomachs of 15% of people living in Australia, is now known to be the most common cause of ulcers world wide. A biopsy taken during a gastroscopy, checks for this bacterium. Breath tests are also used to detect its presence.

Ulcers are not caused by stress or food, (although stress may make people's stomach "churn" or feel uncomfortable).

TREATMENT

Ulcer treatment is usually aimed at reducing stomach acid production for 6 - 8 weeks. Over this period most ulcers will heal. Additionally when the bacterium Helicobacter pylori is present, eradication therapy using antibiotics ensures ulcers will not recur. (This microbe is not highly contagious, it is not usually necessary for family members or close contacts to receive treatment).

Where possible, arthritis medication should be ceased during ulcer treatment and avoided in the future. If you are taking aspirin for heart disease or to prevent strokes, do not stop this medication until first discussing the matter with your doctor. Paracetamol, (Panadol) and Codeine do not cause ulcers and are quite safe to take as analgesics during ulcer healing.

Smoking cigarettes delays the ulcer healing process and should be avoided. Alcohol also should be limited whilst ulcers are being treated.

Very rarely, early stomach cancers can masquerade as stomach ulcers. For this reason, a check-up gastroscopy is usually advised at the end of treatment to ensure the ulcer has completely healed. Small samples (biopsies) will often be taken routinely. (Duodenal ulcers do not pose this threat and need not be checked routinely after treatment).

