

Helicobacter Pylori

What is Helicobacter pylori?

Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) is a type of bacteria that can cause stomach irritation (gastritis) and ulcers. H. pylori may also be a factor in the development of stomach cancer.

How does it occur?

H. pylori is a common infection. By middle age 50% of adults have been infected with it. It tends to spread among people who are living together, sharing food and bathrooms.

Doctors are trying to learn why some but not most people infected with H. pylori have gastritis and ulcers. Stomach-irritating habits such as smoking and drinking alcohol may contribute to these problems.

What are the symptoms?

Many people never have any symptoms.

If you have gastritis or ulcers, the symptoms may be:

- stomach pain
- nausea or vomiting
- loss of appetite.

Symptoms may be worse before or after meals.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and your family history of stomach problems. He or she will also ask how much alcohol and nicotine you are using. Your provider will examine you.

If your health care provider tests you for H. pylori, there are 3 ways to do it:

- A **blood test**, which looks for antibodies to H. pylori and is the least expensive test. It is about 90% effective in diagnosing H. pylori.
- The **urea breath test**, which checks for byproducts of H. pylori bacteria. This test is not as readily available as the blood test, but it is accurate. To do the test, you swallow a capsule containing urea. If you have an H. pylori infection, the bacteria break down the urea. The byproducts of the urea can be measured in your breath 10 minutes after you swallow the capsule.
- **Endoscopy**, with a biopsy of the stomach lining, which is the most direct method. An endoscope is a thin, flexible tube with a tiny camera. The doctor inserts the endoscope through your mouth down into your upper digestive tract. He or she can then look at the stomach or upper intestine for signs of gastritis or ulcers. The doctor may remove tiny pieces of stomach tissue (biopsies) through the tube. If H. pylori bacteria are present, their effects on the stomach lining can be seen in the tissue samples.

To look for the effects of H. pylori, such as ulcers, you may have a special stomach x-ray called an upper GI.

How is it treated?

Your health care provider may recommend treatment only if you have symptoms of H. pylori infection. If you do have symptoms, you will probably take a combination of medicines including antibiotics for up to 2 weeks.

How long will the effects last?

Symptoms of H. pylori infection usually improve within a few days after you start taking the medicine.

The symptoms may come back later if you become reinfected.

Common complications of H. pylori infection are gastritis and ulcers.

How can I help prevent H. pylori infection?

Doctors don't yet know how to prevent H. pylori infection.

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