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## **Peptic Ulcer Disease**

Peptic ulcers are defined as stomach acid related ulcers of the stomach or duodenum. They are one of the most common and costly diseases of the GI tract. If you doubt this, just consider how many TV advertisements you have seen in the last year regarding the “Purple Pill”(Nexium) or Zantac or TUMS, etc. The reason for all these ads is that there are a lot of people with early stages of ulcer disease. Nearly 500,000 people develop new peptic ulcers each year, and there are 4 million additional who have recurrences. It is estimated that 3 to 4 million patients see a doctor each year for ulcer disease, a similar number medicate themselves, and don’t see a doctor.

The most dramatic change in the management of ulcer disease came in the last 15 years. The organism, *Helicobacter Pylori*, was identified and found to be a major contributor to ulcer disease. It is now believed that 90% of duodenal ulcers and 75% of stomach ulcers are infected with *H. Pylori*. The risk of recurrence is greatly reduced when the bacteria is eliminated as a part of therapy. There is evidence of person-to-person transmission of the infection, and it is more common in the lower socio-economic strata of society although it can occur in anyone. Physicians were initially very resistant to the idea that ulcers were an infectious problem. It was thought that stomach acid would kill any bacteria. To prove the point, Dr. Barry Marshall an Australian physician, drank a mixture of *H. Pylori* and induced an ulcer in himself.

The other major contributors to peptic ulcer are alcohol, aspirin, NSAIDs (such as Ibuprofen) and stress. The combination of several of these risk factors greatly increases the risk of ulcer.

Most ulcer disease is now treated with acid reducing medications and lifestyle changes that reduce ulcer risk. Antibiotics are also an important aspect of ulcer treatment for those who have the H. Pylori organism present.

Numerous famous people have suffered from peptic ulcer disease, including George Bush in the 1960's when he was working with the CIA, and Pope John Paul in the 80's. It is thought that Charles Darwin suffered from ulcer disease while on his famous voyage and upper intestinal bleeding was his cause of death. Alfred Nobel (founder of the Nobel Prize) is thought to have suffered from chronic ulcer disease. It is interesting that the Noble prize for Physiology and Medicine went to Dr. Barry Marshall in 2005 for his earlier discovery of H. Pylori.

Ulcers most commonly present with pain in the upper abdomen. It may come on a couple hours after meals or at night. It is usually tolerable at fist and can be relieved by food or antacids. When the ulcer becomes deeper the pain becomes more constant and may radiate to the back. About 5% of ulcer may perforate causing leakage of the stomach contents into the peritoneal cavity and diffuse severe pain. Another group of patients may develop bleeding. The ulcer can erode into an artery in the duodenum and this can bleed significantly. A smaller group of patients will not experience the dramatic presentation of bleeding or perforation, but instead will slowly narrow down the duodenum to the point where food and fluids cannot move out of the stomach. This is called gastric outlet obstruction.

Most ulcer disease is handled with medications. In the described complications of peptic ulcer disease, surgery is may become necessary. In the case of perforation, the area of the hole in the duodenum is patched with some adjacent tissue to close the defect. The leakage is suctioned and washed out, and the infection treated. Bleeding ulcers can often be treated with various endoscopic cautery techniques, but if the bleeding is severe or if cautery fails, then they must

be surgically stopped with suturing of the bleeding artery. Outlet obstruction is treated surgically with creating a larger opening for the stomach to empty into the duodenum.

In summary, ulcer disease is common in the USA today. It is most often treated medically. This can often involve antibiotics as well as acid reducing medications. Surgery is reserved for the complications of ulcers disease such as bleeding, perforation and obstruction.

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