

Helicobacter Pylori

H.pylori is a small bacterium that is found in the stomach lining of some people. For most it does not cause any trouble. However for those with duodenal ulcers and gastric ulcers, H.pylori needs to be eradicated before healing can occur.

What does Helicobacter pylori do?

As part of its normal activity the stomach produces acid. The inside of the stomach wall is protected from this by a thick mucous layer. H.pylori weakens this protective layer and also causes inflammation of the stomach lining. Over time some acid may get through and damage the lining of the stomach. This can lead to erosions which can lead to the following diseases;

- **Inflammation of the lining of the stomach (gastritis):** All people with H.pylori infection have inflammation but mostly without symptoms. In some people, this inflammation progresses to other diseases, but disappears if treated successfully.
- **Duodenal ulcers:** H.pylori is the cause of about 90% of ulcers in the duodenum. The most common symptom is pain the upper part of the abdomen.
- **Stomach (gastric) ulcers:** H.pylori is the cause of about 70% of stomach ulcers.
- **Cancer of the stomach:** H.pylori increases the risk of some forms of cancer of the stomach. Note: only a small minority of infected people ever develop this problem.

Who should be tested for Helicobacter pylori?

People who have had an ulcer should be tested for H.pylori. Successful treatment of H.pylori will speed up ulcer healing and prevent recurrence.

People who have Dyspepsia should also be tested.

How can I be tested for Helicobacter pylori?

- **Breath test:** H.pylori in the stomach is able to convert a naturally occurring substance called urea into the gas carbon dioxide. If specially labelled urea is swallowed, labelled carbon dioxide can be detected for a short time in the breath which determines if the infection is present. This test is preferred for pregnant women or children and is useful to check eradication after treatment.
- **Blood test:** This can detect current or recent infection but remains positive for several years after successful treatment. However, overall it is not as useful as other methods.
- **Stool Test:** A stool sample can be used to determine if there is an active infection.
- **Gastroscopy:** During gastroscopy the specialist passes a flexible tube into the stomach. This allows small samples (biopsies) to be taken from the lining of the stomach which are sent to the laboratory for analysis, This test is very accurate and the preferred test.

How is Helicobacter pylori treated?

For complete healing to restore the stomach lining to a healthy state, the cause of the problem, H.pylori, should be eliminated.

Treatment is usually oral drug therapy which includes an ulcer healing drug and two antibiotics. Packs containing all the drugs required are available (Klacid Hp7 and Losec Hp7 are recommended). The success rate is 90% if taken as directed.

Eradication can be checked through either breath test or re-biopsy. These tests must be performed at least four weeks after all treatment is stopped, as H.pylori can grow again within this time. If the treatment has not been successful, a different combination of drugs may be tried.

Am I likely to become infected again?

No. The chance, after successful treatment, is only 0.5-1% per year.