

Understanding Helicobacter pylori (*H. pylori*)

What is *H. pylori*?

H. pylori (Helicobacter pylori) is a type of bacteria that causes an infection. This bacteria infects the stomach and can cause pain or discomfort in the upper belly, as well as nausea or vomiting. *H. pylori* is the most common chronic bacterial infection in the world. More than half the world's population may have this infection.

What health problems are caused by *H. pylori*?

H. pylori can cause:

- Inflammation of the stomach lining (gastritis)
- Peptic ulcers (small sores) in the stomach lining or upper part of the small intestine
- Stomach cancer

Most people are infected with *H. pylori* yet many never develop symptoms or illness. Doctors do not know why *H. pylori* infection causes problems in some people and not in others. Health problems caused by *H. pylori* develop in different ways in different patients. This infection is responsible for most cases of stomach and duodenum ulcers. It is also a major risk factor for stomach cancer.

How is *H. pylori* spread?

H. pylori is spread most often through saliva and vomit. It can also be spread easily through fecal contamination in food or water. Many people get *H. pylori* during childhood. Infection is more likely to happen in crowded conditions and in areas with poor sanitation.

How do I know if I have *H. pylori*?

Several tests are available to check for an infection. These include a blood test, breath test, stool test and biopsy. If you have any of the following symptoms, seek medical attention right away from your health care provider:

- Burning, cramping, or hunger-like pain in the stomach area. These often happen 1-3 hours after a meal or in the middle of the night
- Pain that gets better or worse with eating
- Nausea or vomiting
- Stools that are black, dark or bloody

How is *H. pylori* treated?

H. pylori is often treated with a multi-drug treatment. This treatment can include a course of antibiotics and a medicine that reduces stomach acid. If you are treated for *H. pylori* infection, it is vital to take the medicine as prescribed and to schedule a follow-up test 4-6 weeks after finishing any prescribed medication to check that the *H. pylori* infection has gone away.