

Digestive Health Complex

Helicobacter Pylori

Definition

H. pylori infection occurs when a bacterium called Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) infects your stomach or the first part of your small intestine. It is thought to be present in about half the people in the world. For many people, H. pylori infection causes no signs or symptoms, but others may have serious complications such as ulcers and stomach cancer. In the United States, H. pylori infection and complication rates are declining.

Causes, Incidence and Risk Factors

Up to half of the world's population is infected with H. pylori. Those living in developing countries or crowded, unsanitary conditions are most likely to contract the bacterium, which is passed from person to person. H. pylori only grows in the stomach and is usually contracted during childhood.

Interestingly, many people have this organism in their stomach, but don't get an ulcer or gastritis. Coffee drinking, smoking and drinking alcohol increase your risk for an ulcer from H. pylori.

Symptoms

Most cases of H. pylori infection produce no signs or symptoms. Those that can occur include:

- An ache or burning pain in your abdomen
- Nausea and vomiting
- Frequent burping
- Bloating
- Weight Loss

Signs and Tests

Simple blood, breath and stool tests can determine if you are infected with H. pylori. If you have symptoms, your doctor will determine if you should have these screening tests.

The most accurate way to diagnose H. pylori is through upper endoscopy of the esophagus, stomach and duodenum. Because this procedure is invasive, it is generally only done on people suspected to have an ulcer or who are at high risk for ulcers or other complications from H. pylori, such as stomach cancer.

Risk Factors include being over 45 or having symptoms such as:

- Anemia
- Difficulty swallowing
- Gastrointestinal bleeding
- Unexplained weight loss

Following treatment, breath and stool tests can determine if you have been cured of the infection.

Expectations/Prognosis

Once the H. pylori bacteria are gone from your body, the chance of being infected again is very low.

Prevention

In areas of the world where H. pylori infection and its complications, such as stomach cancer are common, doctors sometimes test healthy people for H. pylori. For instance, stomach cancer is much more common in Asian countries than in the United States. Some doctors argue that treating high-risk people for H. pylori before it causes complications may help prevent serious diseases, such as stomach cancer.

Whether there is a benefit to treating H. pylori when you have no signs or symptoms of infection is controversial among doctors.

If you're concerned about H. pylori infection or think you may have a high risk of stomach cancer, talk to your doctor. Together you can decide whether you may benefit from H. pylori screening.