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Patient education: Peptic ulcers (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is a peptic ulcer? — A peptic ulcer is a sore that can form on the lining of the stomach or duodenum. The duodenum is the first part of the small intestine ([figure 1](#)).

What are the symptoms of a peptic ulcer? — Some people with peptic ulcers have no symptoms. Other people can have symptoms that include:

- Pain in the upper belly – Ulcers in the stomach often cause pain soon after a person eats. Ulcers in the duodenum often cause pain or burning when a person's stomach is empty.
- Bloating, or feeling full after eating a small amount of food
- Not feeling hungry
- Nausea or vomiting

All of these symptoms can also be caused by other conditions. But if you have these symptoms, let your doctor or nurse know.

Sometimes, peptic ulcers can lead to serious problems. These include:

- Bleeding – This can cause smelly and black-colored bowel movements or vomiting blood.
- A hole in the wall of the stomach or duodenum – This can cause sudden and severe belly pain.
- Obstruction – This is a blockage of the intestine. It can cause a feeling of fullness, bloating, indigestion, nausea, vomiting, belly pain shortly after eating, and weight loss.

What causes peptic ulcers? — Common causes of peptic ulcers include:

- An infection in the stomach or duodenum caused by a type of bacteria called "H. pylori"
- Medicines called "nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs" (NSAIDs) – NSAIDs include pain-relieving medicines such as [aspirin](#), [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin), and [naproxen](#) (sample brand names: Aleve, Naprosyn).

Is there a test for a peptic ulcer? — Yes. If you have symptoms of a peptic ulcer, your doctor might do:

- Tests to check for H. pylori infection – Doctors can check for H. pylori infection by doing:
 - Breath tests – These tests measure substances in a person's breath after he or she has been given a special liquid to drink
 - Lab tests that check a sample of a bowel movement for the infection

- A procedure called an "upper endoscopy" – During an upper endoscopy, a doctor puts a thin tube with a camera on the end into a person's mouth and down into the stomach and duodenum ([figure 2](#)). Then he or she checks the lining of the stomach and duodenum for ulcers.

How are peptic ulcers treated? — Treatment depends on the cause, but most peptic ulcers are treated with medicines.

People with *H. pylori* infection are often treated with 3 or more medicines for 2 weeks to get rid of the infection. This treatment can include:

- Medicine to reduce the amount of acid that the stomach makes
- Different types of antibiotics

Some people need to take medicines that reduce the amount of acid for a longer amount of time. Some people take these medicines for the rest of their life.

It is important to follow all your doctors' instructions about taking your medicines. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have any side effects from your medicines.

People who have serious problems from their peptic ulcers might also need to be treated with surgery.

What happens after treatment? — After treatment, people often have follow-up tests. These can include:

- Tests to check that the *H. pylori* infection has gone away
- An upper endoscopy to check that the peptic ulcer has healed

What else can I do to help a peptic ulcer heal? — To help a peptic ulcer heal and to prevent future peptic ulcers, you can:

- Not smoke
- Not take NSAIDs (if possible)

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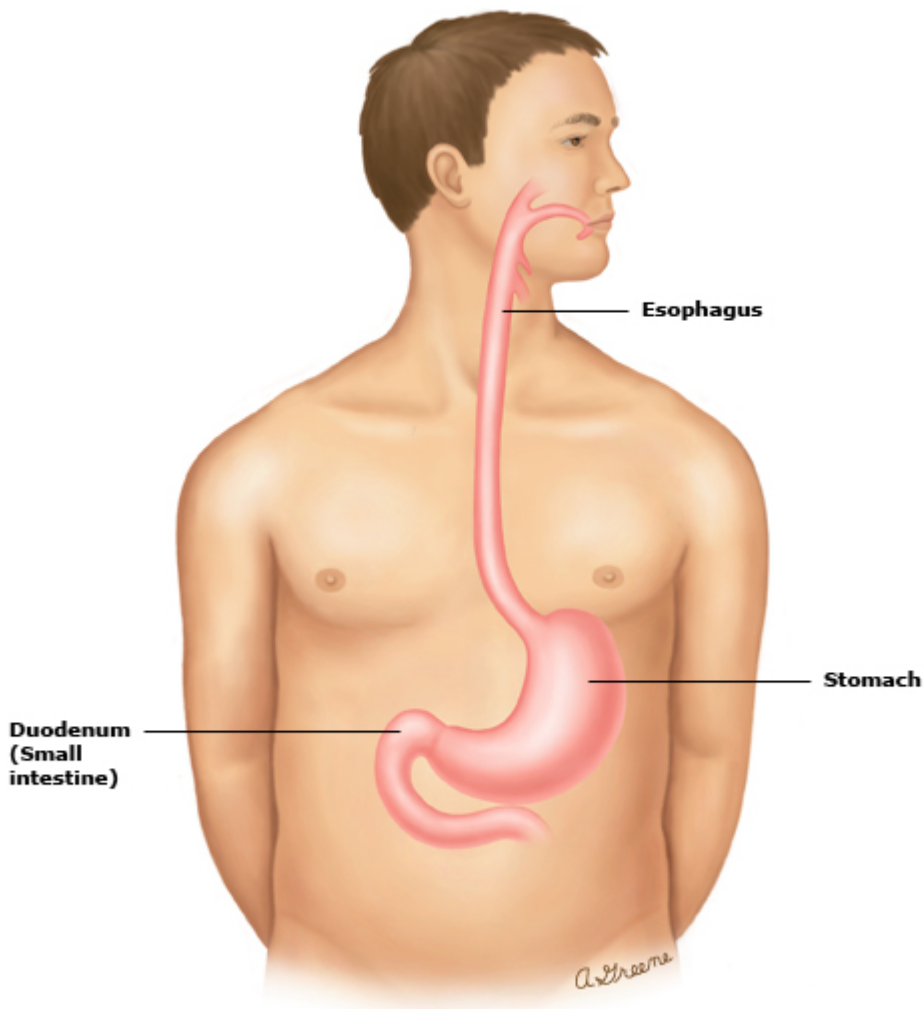
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GRAPHICS

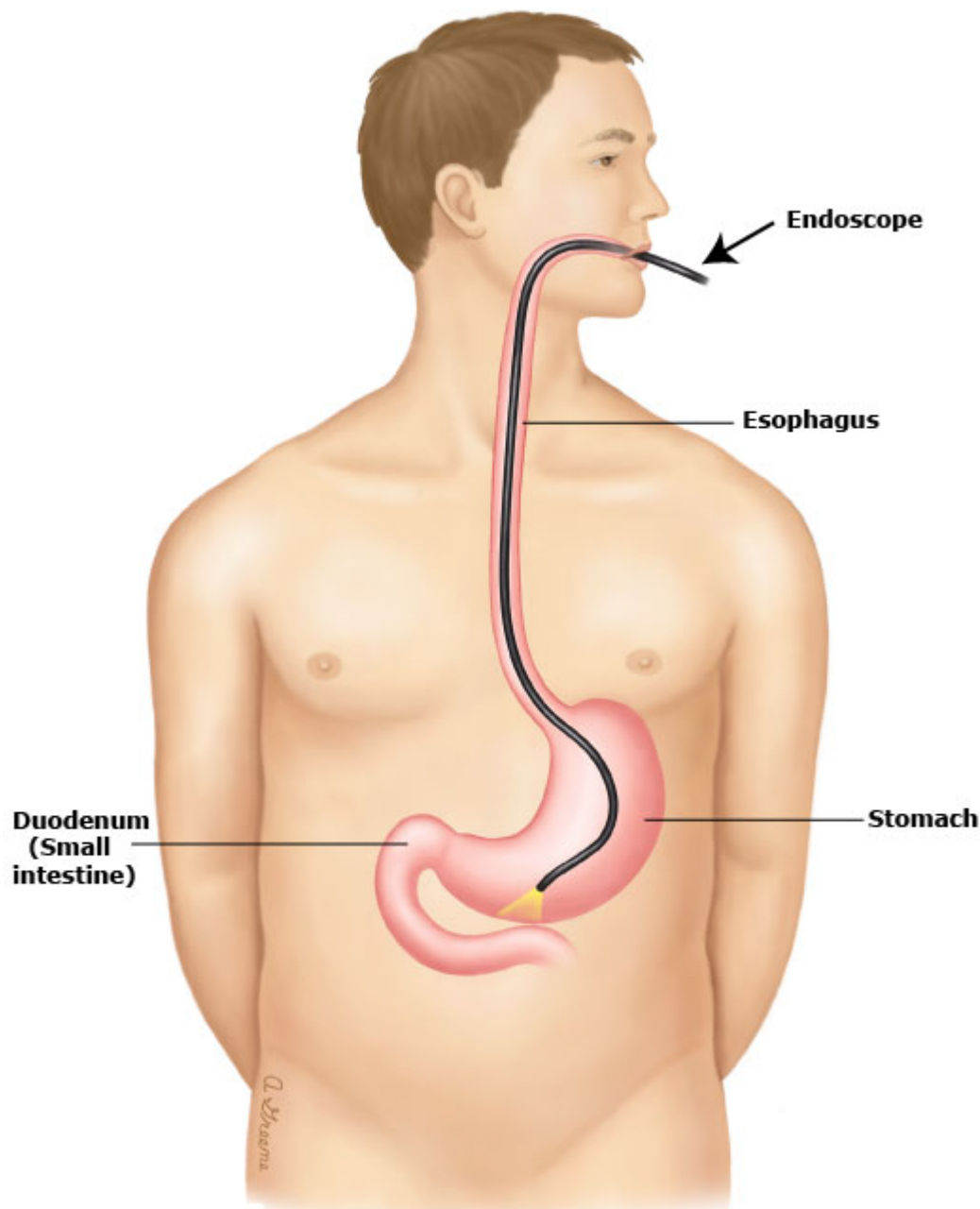
Upper digestive tract



The upper digestive tract includes the esophagus (the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach), the stomach, and the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine).

Graphic 55616 Version 5.0

Upper endoscopy



During an upper endoscopy, you lie down and the doctor puts a thin tube with a camera and light on the end (called an endoscope) into your mouth and down into your esophagus, stomach, and duodenum (the first part of your small intestine). The camera sends pictures from inside your body to a television screen. That way, your doctor can see the inside of your esophagus, stomach, and duodenum.

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