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 An article on this topic is available in this issue of *AFP*.

What Should I Know About *Helicobacter pylori* Infections?

What is *Helicobacter pylori*?

Helicobacter pylori (say: hel-lick-o-back-ter pie-lor-ee) are bacteria that can live in stomach acid. In many people, infection does not cause any symptoms. In some people, it can hurt the stomach lining, leading to gastritis (inflammation) and ulcers. Most patients with gastritis or an ulcer have pain or burning in the upper abdomen (the area above the belly button). In some people, infection with

H. pylori leads to stomach cancer.

How is *H. pylori* infection diagnosed?

A blood test is an easy way to find out if you have an *H. pylori* infection. You might also get a breath test or a stool test for *H. pylori*. Most often, these tests are used after treatment to find out if the infection is all gone.

Why should I be treated for *H. pylori* infection?

If the *H. pylori* germs are killed, your stomach ulcer or gastritis can be cured. Many people take antacids or other medicines for a long time before they get treated for *H. pylori* infection. After being treated for this infection, they don't need to take as much medicine for their stomach.

If you have gastritis that causes pain but you don't have an ulcer, treatment for *H. pylori* infection may not ease your pain.

How is *H. pylori* infection treated?

Treatment includes a combination of antibiotics and acid-reducing medicines. You should take these

medicines for at least 10 to 14 days. The most effective combinations include at least two antibiotics plus the acid reducers. The acid-reducing medicines help relieve pain and help the antibiotics work better.

What can I do to help the treatment work?

- **Take all of the prescribed medicine.** Your treatment might not work for you if (1) the bacteria resists the antibiotics or (2) you don't take all of the medicine. It is very important to take your medicines for the full 10 to 14 days, as prescribed by your doctor. The first try at getting rid of *H. pylori* infection is usually the most successful, so it is important to do it right.
- **Avoid things that can increase stomach acid.** Increased stomach acid can keep your medicines from working right. You should not take medicines that increase stomach acid, like aspirin, ibuprofen (brand name: Advil), or naproxen (brand name: Aleve). Stay away from cigarettes, alcohol, caffeine, spicy foods, and coffee or tea (regular or decaffeinated).
- **Follow up with your doctor.** See your doctor after you finish your medicines. You may get a breath test or the stool test to make sure the infection is gone.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for information on this and many other health-related topics.

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