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"STOMACH ULCERS: A SILENT DIGESTIVE DISORDER – A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW ARTICLE"

Irfan Ahmad Khan[1], Satpal Kushwaha*[2], Tanya Sharma[3], Ranjan Kr Singh[4]

[1]Student of Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences,Mewar University, Gangrar, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, India - 312901.

[2]Assistant Professor, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences,Mewar University, Gangrar, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, India - 312901.

[3]HOD, Assistant Professor Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences,Mewar University, Gangrar, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, India - 312901.

[4]Associate Professor, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences,Mewar University, Gangrar, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, India - 312901.

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***Corresponding Author: Satpal Kushwaha**

Student of Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences,Mewar University, Gangrar, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, India - 312901.

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ABSTRACT

Peptic ulcer disease (PUD), characterized by disruptions in the gastric or duodenal mucosa, remains a significant yet often overlooked gastrointestinal disorder globally. This review synthesizes current evidence on the epidemiology, pathophysiology, diagnosis, and management of stomach ulcers, emphasizing Helicobacter pylori infection and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) use as primary etiological factors Eradication regimens, and emerging approaches to mitigate complications such as bleeding and we highlight clinical guidelines, therapeutic strategies including proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) and perforation. The findings underscore the importance of early detection and preventive measures to reduce morbidity and healthcare burdens.

KEYWORDS: Stomach ulcer, Gastric ulcer, Peptic ulcer disease, Helicobacter pylori, NSAIDs, Digestive disorder.

INTRODUCTION

Stomach ulcers, a subset of peptic ulcer disease, involve erosions extending into the muscularis propria of the gastric epithelium, commonly in the stomach or proximal duodenum. Once considered a stress-related condition, modern understanding attributes PUD primarily to H. pylori infection and

NSAID exposure, with roughly 66% of cases remaining asymptomatic until complications arise. This silent nature contributes to delayed diagnosis and higher risks of hemorrhage or perforation. The article aims to provide an evidence-based overview suitable for academic and clinical audiences, integrating epidemiological data and guideline-based management.(1)

Epidemiology

Peptic ulcer disease affects approximately 5–10% of the population during their lifetime, although incidence has declined in many countries due to better sanitation, improved awareness, and widespread treatment of H. pylori. In developed countries, ulcer rates have fallen, but NSAID-associated ulcers remain common, especially among elderly patients.(2) Gastric ulcers are seen more frequently in older adults compared with duodenal ulcers. Hospital admissions still occur due to bleeding ulcers, anemia, perforation, and recurrent disease. Socioeconomic conditions, poor hygiene, overcrowding, smoking, and unsupervised drug use contribute significantly to higher prevalence in developing regions. (3)

Anatomy and Protective Physiology of the Stomach

The stomach is a muscular organ located in the upper abdomen between the esophagus and small intestine. Its major functions include food storage, mixing, digestion, and controlled release of contents into the duodenum. Gastric glands secrete hydrochloric acid, pepsinogen, intrinsic factor, and mucus. Under normal circumstances, the stomach protects itself from acid injury through a specialized defense system.(3) This system includes a mucus-bicarbonate barrier, tight epithelial junctions, rapid cell turnover, adequate blood supply, prostaglandin-mediated protection, and local immune defense. When these protective mechanisms weaken or acid-pepsin aggression increases, ulceration can occur.(4)

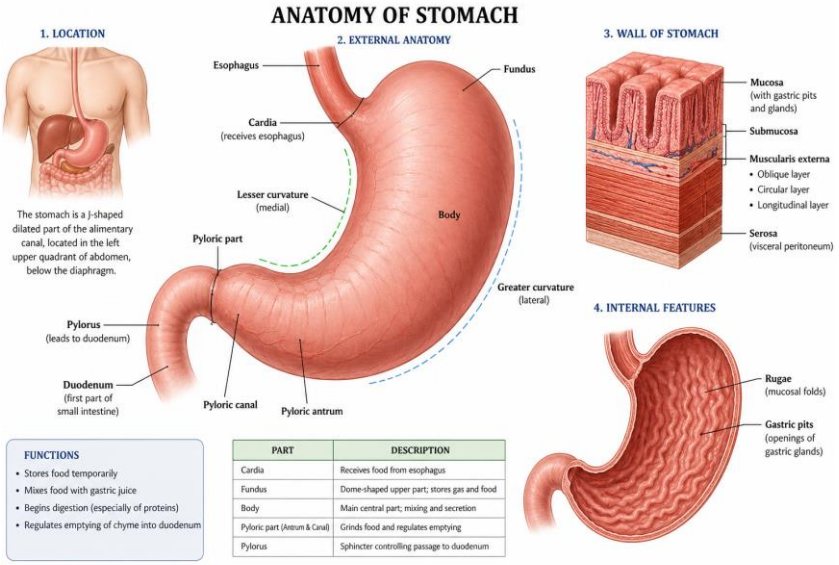

FIG 1: Anatomy and Protective Physiology of the Stomach.

Etiology and Causes

H. pylori are a spiral-shaped bacterium that colonizes the gastric mucosa. It survives acidic conditions by producing urease, which converts urea to ammonia and creates a local neutral environment. Chronic infection leads to inflammation, epithelial damage, altered acid secretion, and increased ulcer risk. It is one of the most important causes of gastric ulcer disease worldwide. (5)

NSAID USE

NSAIDs inhibit cyclooxygenase enzymes and reduce prostaglandin synthesis. As prostaglandins normally stimulate mucus and bicarbonate secretion and maintain mucosal blood flow, their suppression weakens gastric defense. Long-term or high-dose NSAID use markedly increases ulcer risk. Smoking and Alcohol Smoking delays ulcer healing, increases recurrence, and reduces mucosal blood flow.(6) Excess alcohol irritates the gastric lining and may worsen inflammation. Physiological Stress, Severe illness, trauma, burns, sepsis, or ICU admission may lead to stress-related mucosal injury. Rare Causes, These include Zollinger-Ellison syndrome, Crohn's disease, malignancy, radiation injury, cocaine use, and systemic illness.(7)

Pathophysiology

Ulcer formation results from imbalance between aggressive factors and protective factors. Aggressive factors include gastric acid, pepsin, H. pylori, bile reflux, smoking, and ulcerogenic drugs. Protective factors include mucus, bicarbonate, epithelial regeneration, blood flow, and prostaglandins.(8) When the mucosal barrier is disrupted, hydrogen ions diffuse backward into tissues, causing inflammation, edema, vascular injury, and necrosis. Persistent injury creates a crater-like lesion extending into deeper layers. In chronic ulcers, fibrosis may develop around the margins. (9)

Clinical Features

Symptoms may be absent or mild for long periods. When present, the commonest complaint is epigastric pain or burning sensation. Gastric ulcer pain often worsens shortly after meals because food stimulates acid secretion. Other symptoms include nausea, bloating, belching, early satiety, indigestion, reduced appetite, and weight loss. Some patients complain only of fatigue due to chronic blood loss and anemia.(10) Alarm symptoms include vomiting blood, black tarry stools, persistent vomiting, severe sudden abdominal pain, fainting, difficulty swallowing, or unintended weight loss. These require urgent medical evaluation.

Why It Is Called a Silent Disorder

Many ulcers develop gradually and produce nonspecific symptoms that patients ignore as simple acidity or gastritis. Some individuals have no pain at all, especially elderly patients taking NSAIDs. In such cases, the first sign may be gastrointestinal bleeding, perforation, or severe anemia. This silent

progression explains why stomach ulcer remains clinically important despite availability of effective treatment. (11)

Diagnosis

Diagnosis begins with history taking, including pain pattern, drug use, smoking, alcohol intake, and prior ulcer history. Physical examination may reveal epigastric tenderness or signs of anemia. Upper gastrointestinal endoscopy is the gold standard for diagnosis. It allows direct visualization of the ulcer, assessment of bleeding risk, biopsy, and exclusion of gastric cancer. Biopsy is especially important for gastric ulcers because some malignant lesions mimic benign ulcers. Noninvasive tests for H. pylori include urea breath test, stool antigen test, and selected serological tests. Laboratory tests such as CBC may detect anemia or infection. (12)

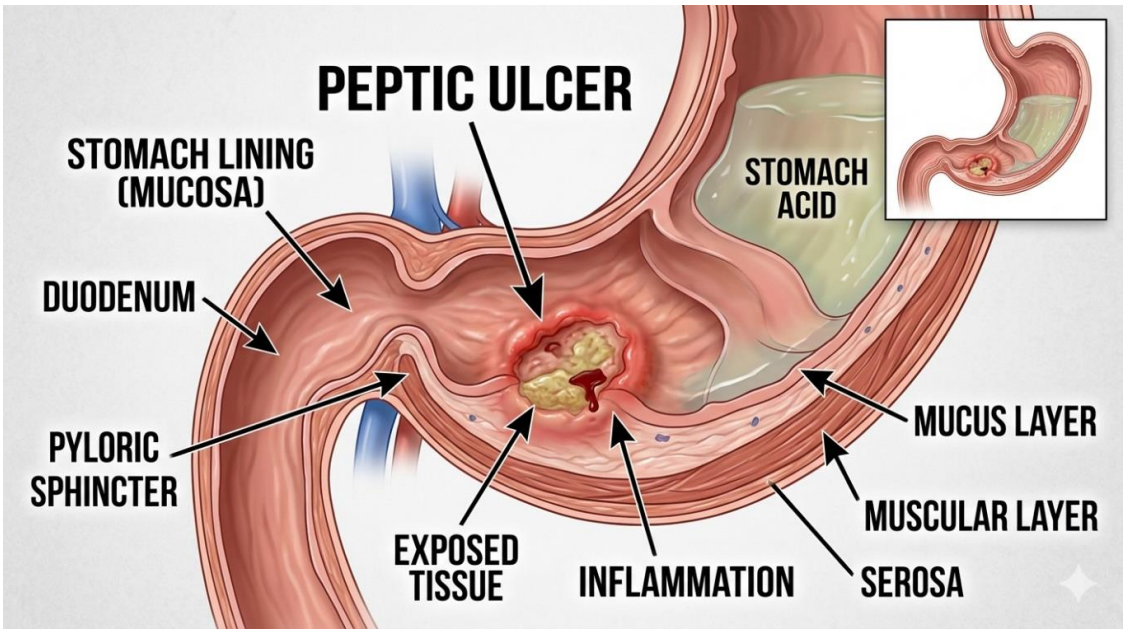

Fig 2: Peptic Ulcer cycle.

Differential Diagnosis

Conditions that may resemble stomach ulcer include gastritis, gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD), gallstones, pancreatitis, functional dyspepsia, myocardial ischemia, gastric cancer, and irritable bowel syndrome. Proper diagnosis is therefore essential.(13)

Management and Treatment

- **Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs):**
- PPIs such as omeprazole, pantoprazole, esomeprazole, and pantoprazole are first-line therapy. They suppress acid secretion by blocking H+/K+ ATPase pumps and promote healing.

- **H. pylori Eradication Therapy**

  Patients with confirmed infection receive multidrug therapy, commonly PPI plus antibiotics with or without bismuth, depending on resistance patterns. Withdrawal of NSAIDsStopping the offending drug significantly improves healing. If NSAIDs are essential, gastro protection with PPIs is advised. Cytoprotective DrugsSucralfate coats the ulcer surface. Misoprostol may help prevent NSAID ulcers but can cause diarrhea.(14)
- **Endoscopic Therapy**Bleeding ulcers may require injection therapy, thermal coagulation, or clipping. Surgery Now less common, surgery is reserved for perforation, obstruction, uncontrolled bleeding, or refractory ulcers.

Lifestyle and Dietary Measures

Although food alone does not cause ulcers, lifestyle measures support recovery. Patients should avoid smoking, excess alcohol, and unnecessary NSAIDs. Regular meals, adequate sleep, stress reduction, and hydration are helpful. Foods that trigger pain, such as very spicy or acidic meals, may be reduced individually.

Complications

Untreated ulcers may lead to severe outcomes. Hemorrhage is the most common complication and may present with hematemesis or melena. Perforation causes sudden severe abdominal pain and peritonitis. Penetration into adjacent organs such as pancreas may cause persistent pain. Scarring near the pylorus may obstruct gastric emptying, causing vomiting and weight loss. Chronic H. pylori gastritis is also linked with gastric malignancy risk. (16)

Prevention

Public health prevention includes hygiene improvement, clean water access, rational NSAID prescribing, smoking cessation, and early treatment of dyspepsia. High-risk patients using aspirin or NSAIDs may benefit from prophylactic PPIs under medical advice.(17)

Recent Advances and Future Trends

Recent research focuses on antibiotic resistance in H. pylori, potassium-competitive acid blockers (P-CABs), personalized eradication regimens, micro biome-based therapies, and minimally invasive endoscopic hemostatic devices. Better resistance-guided therapy may improve cure rates in the future. (18)

METHODOLOGY

This review employs a systematic narrative synthesis of peer-reviewed literature from 2010 to 2025, focusing on clinical trials, meta-analyses, and guideline documents indexed in PubMed, PMC, and gastroenterology journals. Key search terms include “peptic ulcer disease,” “gastric ulcer,” “H. pylori,” “NSAID-induced ulcer,” and “PUD management.(19) Studies were prioritized for robustness (randomized controlled trials, cohort studies) and relevance to current guidelines, with inclusion criteria emphasizing adult populations and complication-focused outcomes. Data extraction covered epidemiology, risk factors, diagnostic modalities (endoscopy, breath tests), and therapeutic efficacy of PPIs, antibiotics, and endoscopic procedures.(20)

DISCUSSION

PUD’s pathophysiology centers on an imbalance between aggressive factors (acid, pepsin, NSAIDs) and protective mechanisms (mucus, bicarbonate, blood flow), exacerbated by H. pylori’s urease activity and cytotoxins.(21)This imbalance leads to mucosal breaches, with epigastria pain post-meals as a classic symptom, though silent presentations are common Management prioritizes eradication of H. pylori via PPI-triple therapy (e.g., amoxicillin, clarithromycin), reducing recurrence from 50-60% to near zero. For NSAID users, discontinuation or PPI co-therapy is pivotal, with guidelines suggesting PPIs or vonoprazan for prevention.(22). Bleeding ulcers require urgent endoscopic hemostasis and PPI infusions, with follow-up testing to ensure eradication. Emerging trends include vonoprazan’s superior acid suppression and probiotic adjuncts for mucosal healing, though evidence remains evolving.(23)

RESULTS

Epidemiological data indicate PUD affects diverse age groups, with H. pylori prevalence up to 50% in some regions and NSAID use contributing to 20-30% of cases.(24)Clinical trials demonstrate 80-90% eradication success with PPI-triple therapy, improving healing rates and reducing perforation risks by 70%. NSAID-associated ulcers show 3.5-6.5 folds.(25)Higher complication risks when combined with H. pylori. Endoscopic management of bleeding ulcers achieves 90% hemostasis, with 10% rebleeding rates mitigated by prolonged PPI therapy.Demographic analyses reveal higher incidence in African American/Hispanic populations and first-degree relatives. Underscoring genetic and socioeconomic factors. Asymptomatic “silent” ulcers account for a third of cases, emphasizing screening in high-risk cohorts.(21)

CONCLUSION

Stomach ulcers represent a silent yet impactful digestive disorder, with H. pylori and NSAIDs as predominant drivers requiring integrated, guideline-driven management.Early diagnosis via endoscopy and non-invasive testing, coupled with PPI-based eradication and NSAID modification,

significantly reduces complications and recurrence. Future research should explore personalized therapies, probiotic adjuncts, and global access to eradication regimens, particularly in resource-limited settings. This review serves as a comprehensive academic resource for clinicians and researchers addressing PUD's evolving landscape.

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