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.