Check In with Your Doc to Check Out Constant Stomach Aches

January 18, 2013

It's common to ignore a chronic stomach ache by blaming stress and a bad diet. But this may be a mistake. In recent years, doctors have found that gastritis, inflammation of the stomach lining and peptic ulcers, holes in the stomach lining or duodenum, another part of the gastrointestinal system, or esophagus (the thin tube through which food is transported from the mouth to the stomach) are often related to the presence of Helicobacter pylori or H. pylori, a type of bacteria found in as many as two-thirds of the people in the world. In addition, researchers have made additional links between H. pylori and Parkinson's disease and cancer. That's why doctors suggest people get tested when they get symptoms of pain and bloating in their gut.

"The biopsy remains the gold standard for testing for H. pylori," said Olga Falkowski, MD, a board-certified pathologist and medical director of Acupath Laboratories, Inc., a national medical laboratory that specializes in gastrointestinal pathology. "But we are very excited about new technologies coming down the road with the hopes that better determining the causes of ulcers or gastritis can also help prevent Parkinson's and some cancers such as lymphoma."

Many H. pylori infections go undiagnosed because the infection causes no symptoms, says Falkowski. When symptoms are present, such as pain and bloating, prompt and effective testing for H. pylori is key. This is because people with H. pylori infections are at increased risk of developing stomach ulcers or small intestine (gastric or duodenal ulcers), inflammation of the stomach lining, lymphoma and stomach cancer. H. pylori is the only type of bacteria known to cause cancer. One French study, published last year in The Lancet Oncology journal, showed that one in six cancers worldwide is caused by infection, and that one of the four most prevalent infections is H. pylori.

Falkowski suggested patients discuss what their best options are with a doctor for their individual situation. "While it may be tempting to write off abdominal discomfort as stress related, this is one time a patient should follow their instincts and see a doctor," Falkowski warned.

After a diagnosis, if there is a problem, the fix is usually a dosage of simple antibiotics.

Did you know there's a key protein that may address tummy distress? Click here to read more.

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