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## When bloating isn't normal: the little known bacteria that could be causing havoc in your gut

If you have persistent digestive problems, the culprit could be H. Pylori – here's what you can take to relieve symptoms, and foods to avoid

By Margarita Mitchel Pollock  
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If you've taken a quick scroll through Instagram lately you might have spotted a new trend – the rise of the 'bloated and proud' brigade, revealing their swollen bellies with joy and showing the before and after effects of eating beans, or of period pain or IBS.

The fitness influencers are shedding some much-needed light and normalising what for many people is a regular and normal occurrence – bloating. But what about when bloating isn't normal? When your GP is left scratching their head and you've been passed from pillar to post trying to figure out the root cause of the pain and stomach swelling you've had to learn to live with?

“More than a third of people in the UK are infected with a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori* (H. pylori) and some may be completely unaware that H. pylori could be causing their problems,” says [Dr Marnix Jansen](#) from University College Hospital London and researcher funded by the charity for the digestive system, Guts UK. “It's a spiral-shaped bacterium that settles in the sticky mucus that lines the stomach and can cause chronic inflammation in a small number of people.”

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Grace Rudd had been suffering from bloating and IBS-like symptoms for seven years before she found a doctor who was aware of the *H. pylori* bacterium. “I was at my wits end because the pain in my chest was so bad it was waking me up at night,” she recalls. “I knew when I started vomiting in the morning that I had to get a second opinion as I kept being dismissed as simply having IBS and being handed peppermint oil capsules, which did nothing. It wasn’t until I saw a new GP who immediately sent me for the urea breath test that I was able to get treatment.”

The bacterium was discovered in Australia way back in the 1970s yet even so is still often missed by doctors today. A breakthrough came in 1984 when a young gastroenterologist by the name of Barry Marshall offered himself up as a human guinea pig. Barry downed an infectious broth – a petri dish of *H. Pylori* extracted from the gut of a suffering patient – and effectively gave himself an ulcer and won himself a Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in 2005 in the process. His work, along with that of now Emeritus Professor Robin Warren, led to a treatment that has saved countless lives and helped end the misery of undiagnosed gut problems for many.

Yet many GPs are still not testing for *H.pylori*, says Marshall: “Because *H. pylori* is so common, and often has no symptoms, some doctors are reluctant to treat it. But it is an infectious chronic disease, predisposing to ulcers and gastric cancer. After arguing the pros and cons of the treatment for at least 20 years, several countries have now listed *H. pylori* tests and treatment as normal care. It is still a tragedy when an otherwise healthy person develops severe stomach problems when *H.pylori* is so easy to diagnose on a routine health screen by serology antibody blood tests, the stool test or a simple breath test.” He adds: “If you have any GI symptoms at all, it’s worth asking your GP to check you for *H. pylori*.”

Julie Thompson, of Guts UK, who is also a Specialist Gastroenterology Dietitian, explains that for most people *H.pyroli* won't cause any problems. “*Helicobacter pylori* is thought to be present in around 40 per cent of people in the UK. It is very common and for 8-9 out of 10 people, won't have any issues. However, around 15 per cent of people with the condition will develop a stomach ulcer or a duodenal ulcer. If you suspect you have *H. pylori*, speak to your doctor about your symptoms, testing and treatment options. Most of the time, treatment is very straightforward.”

Kirsten Jackson, consultant dietician and Director of [The Food Treatment Clinic](#) says: “Digestive problems can often be overlooked by people who suffer with them because we don’t always talk to our friends and family about our gut and we don’t then realise when symptoms are abnormal. Any persistent digestive symptom should be reported to your GP. For *H. pylori* in particular, look out for symptoms that are ‘upper GI’ – stomach pain, acid reflux, as well as chest pain, indigestion, bloating, losing weight and a feeling of fullness even though you have no appetite.”

*H. pylori* is treated with something called ‘eradication therapy or triple therapy,’ which consists of a Proton pump inhibitor (PPI) to reduce stomach acid production as well as two antibiotics, usually, in very strong doses.

“Eradication therapy was a lifesaver for me,’ says Rudd. “I still have some symptoms of IBS and normal bloating when I eat certain foods, but the constant swelling and agonising pain is gone, and my tummy is much more manageable. I just wish I had been offered a test sooner.”

One thing to look out for after triple therapy is the after effect that such a powerful dose of antibiotics can cause on the gut microbiome, says Linda Booth, natural digestive health expert and the only colonic hydrotherapist working with GPs in a surgery setting. She has written about whether *H. pylori* can cause IBS and vice versa on her website, [justfortummies.co.uk](#). “Eradication therapy can resolve the *H.pylori* but leave another set of symptoms, caused by the ‘bleaching’ effects of the antibiotics, which can then lead to IBS-type symptoms. It can then become a chicken and egg type problem. I highly recommend taking a good quality probiotic supplement to help repopulate good gut bacteria.”

Most studies to date conclude that probiotics are a useful addition to the standard triple therapy and research suggests using a diverse range of probiotics together provides the best results as a treatment for *H. pylori*.

Says Marshall: “Every year new treatments are announced and there is a 99 per cent cure rate if done carefully by GPs who are aware of the condition. More awareness is required but we are getting there.”

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## Natural remedies that can help

**1. Manuka honey** – One of the most potent healing remedies to combat *H Pylori*, this is well known among sufferers as ‘liquid gold’. In 1994, a University in New Zealand found that Manuka honey was able to stop the growth of *H. pylori* after just 72 hours. It kills bacteria through osmosis, where the sugars in the honey attract all the water particles from the infectious bacteria which they need to survive. Look for a UMF Factor of 15+ for the best results.

**2: Prebiotics (ingredients that promote growth of beneficial bacteria)** – Based on the mechanisms at play between H. Pylori and the microbiome it makes sense to suggest that consumption of prebiotic food sources can help to reduce symptoms. In fact, synbiotics, a combination of probiotics and prebiotics, have also shown some success in eradicating H. pylori infection in children.

**3: Bananas** – They contain compounds known as protease inhibitors, which can help eliminate H. pylori bacteria.

**4: Broccoli** – The sprouts contain a high concentration of sulforaphane, which has been proven to help inhibit the growth of H. pylori.

**5: Mastic gum** – A resin grown from a tree in the Mediterranean that has shown some positive effects in helping to kill the H.pylori bacteria as detailed in a study, from 2010 which revealed 19 out of 52 patients cleared their infection by chewing the gum for two weeks. Taking it (via tablets or gum) along with antibiotics yielded the best results.

**6: Probiotics** – Promising studies have shown that probiotics could improve H. pylori eradication and reduce side effects during therapy.

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## Foods to avoid

**1: Oily foods** – “Try to avoid oily foods as that tends to trigger the reflux system. Also, avoid things that could trigger an ulcer, like spicy foods,” says Dr Sunni Patel, a nutritionist and Crohn’s sufferer who runs [Dish Dash Deets](#), featuring gut healthy recipes.

**2: Salt** – Studies have shown that high-salt diets can actually alter the cells in the stomach, making them more prone to H. pylori infection.

**3: Alcohol** – Be careful with your alcohol intake, especially this Christmas. It can also cause erosion of the stomach lining and exacerbate symptoms greatly, especially at night.

**4: Fizzy drinks** – Carbonated drinks can distend the stomach and can cause pain and acid reflux.

**5: Citrus** – Avoid lemon, orange and pineapple, as they can cause stomach pain and heartburn.

Read more: [25 tips on how to take care of your digestive system](#)



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