Peptic ulcers are holes or breaks in the protective lining of the duodenum (the upper part of the small intestine) or the stomach -- areas that come into contact with stomach acids and enzymes.

Duodenal ulcers are more common than stomach ulcers.

Comparatively rare are esophageal ulcers, which form in the esophagus –

or swallowing tube -- and are often a result of alcohol abuse.

Until the mid-1980s, the conventional wisdom was that ulcers form as a result

of stress, a genetic predisposition to excessive stomach acid secretion,

and poor lifestyle habits (including overindulging in rich and fatty foods,

alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco).

It was believed that such influences contribute to a buildup of stomach

acids that erode the protective lining of the stomach, duodenum, or

esophagus.

While excessive stomach acid secretion certainly plays a role in the development

of ulcers, a relatively recent theory holds that bacterial infection is the primary cause

of peptic ulcers. Indeed, research conducted since the mid-1980s has persuasively demonstrated that the bacterium Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) is present in more than 90% of duodenal ulcers and about 80% of stomach ulcers.