Myth or fact? Ulcers are caused by stress. The answer is myth.

Millions of Americans are affected by ulcers every year. Ulcers cause pain in the stomach, bleeding, and in severe cases even perforation of the stomach wall. Roughly 6,000 deaths are attributed to ulcers annually. For many years we have been told that stress reduces mucous production in the stomach. That exposes the walls of the stomach to the damaging effects of our digestive enzymes and increases our risk of developing an ulcer. It was not uncommon to hear people say, “I need to stop worrying so much, I’m going to give myself an ulcer.”

Roughly 75% of us still believe that stress is the cause of ulcers. Well, stress really isn’t the cause of most ulcers. In fact, years ago, many patients took steps to reduce their stress levels, but didn’t see improvements in their pain or other symptoms associated with their ulcers. The author of an article, published in the Journal of Gastroenterology, says that “H. pylori infection is recognized throughout the world as the most common cause of both duodenal and gastric ulcers.”

There is some evidence that stress may intensify the symptoms of an ulcer, or make an ulcer worse, but it is generally agreed upon that most ulcers are caused by this bacterial infection. Doctors think the H. pylori bacteria causes ulcers by weakening the coating of the stomach, allowing the digestive acids to reach tissues lining the stomach walls, resulting in irritation, sores, and ulcers. Medical professionals believe that non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, excessive body weight, smoking, and alcohol all can contribute to ulcers.

Two common methods used to treat ulcers include antacids, which help reduce the amount of acid in the stomach, and antibiotics, to kill the H. pylori bacteria. You
certainly want to take steps to control stress in your life, but controlling stress will probably have little impact on whether or not you develop an ulcer.

Reference: