

Diverticulosis and Diverticulitis

Many people have small pouches in their colon that bulge outward through weak spots, like an inner tube that pokes through weak places in a tire. Each pouch is called a diverticulum. Pouches (plural) are called diverticula. The condition of having diverticula is called diverticulosis. About 10 percent of Americans over the age of 40 have diverticulosis. The condition becomes more common as people age. About half of people over the age of 60 have diverticulosis. When the pouches become infected or inflamed, it is called diverticulitis. This can happen in about 20 % of people with diverticulosis.

Diverticulosis Symptoms

Most people with diverticulosis do not have any discomfort or symptoms. However, symptoms may include mild cramps, bloating, and constipation. Other diseases such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and stomach ulcers cause similar problems, so these symptoms do not always mean a person has diverticulosis. You should visit your doctor if you have these symptoms.

Diverticulitis Symptoms

The most common symptom of diverticulitis is abdominal pain. If infection is the cause, fever, nausea, vomiting, chills, cramping, and constipation may occur as well.

What causes Diverticulosis?

Although not proven, the dominant theory is that a low-fiber diet is the main cause of diverticular disease. The disease was first noticed in the United States in the early 1900s. At about the same time, processed foods were introduced into the American diet. Many processed foods contain refined, low-fiber flour. Unlike whole-wheat flour, refined flour has no wheat bran.

Diverticular disease is common in developed or industrialized countries—particularly the United States, England, and Australia—where low-fiber diets are common. The disease is rare in countries of Asia and Africa, where people eat high-fiber vegetable diets.

Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that the body cannot digest. Some fiber dissolves easily in water (soluble fiber). It takes on a soft, jelly-like texture in the intestines. Some fiber passes almost unchanged through the intestines (insoluble fiber). Both kinds of fiber help make stools soft and easy to pass. Fiber also prevents constipation.

Constipation makes the muscles strain to move stool that is too hard. It is the main cause of increased pressure in the colon. This excess pressure might cause the weak spots in the colon to bulge out and become diverticula. Diverticulitis occurs when diverticula become infected or inflamed. Doctors are not certain what causes the infection. It may begin when stool or bacteria are caught in the diverticula. An attack of diverticulitis can develop suddenly without warning.

How is Diverticulosis or Diverticulitis diagnosed?

To diagnose diverticular disease, the doctor asks about medical history, does a physical exam, and may perform one or more diagnostic tests. Because most people do not have symptoms, diverticulosis is often found through tests ordered for another ailment.

When taking a medical history, the doctor may ask about bowel habits, symptoms, pain, diet, and medications. The physical exam usually involves a digital rectal exam. To perform this test, the doctor inserts a gloved, lubricated finger into the rectum to detect tenderness, blockage, or blood. The doctor may check stool for signs of bleeding and test blood for signs of infection. The doctor may also order x rays or other tests.

What is the treatment for Diverticulosis or Diverticulitis?

A high-fiber diet and, occasionally, mild pain medications will help relieve symptoms in most cases. Sometimes an attack of diverticulitis is serious enough to require a liquid diet, antibiotics, a possible hospital stay and/or possibly surgery.

Diverticulosis

Increasing the amount of fiber in the diet may reduce symptoms of diverticulosis and prevent complications such as diverticulitis. Fiber keeps stool soft and lowers pressure inside the colon so that bowel contents can move through easily. More than 25 grams of fiber is recommended daily. The doctor may also recommend taking a fiber product such as Citrucel or Metamucil once a day. These products are mixed with water and provide about 2 to 3 grams of fiber per tablespoon, mixed with 8 ounces of water.

Until recently, many doctors suggested avoiding foods with small seeds such as tomatoes or strawberries because they believed that particles could lodge in the diverticula and cause inflammation. However, it is now generally accepted that only foods that may irritate or get caught in the diverticula cause problems.

Foods such as nuts, popcorn hulls, and sunflower, pumpkin, caraway, and sesame seeds should be avoided. The seeds in tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers, strawberries, and raspberries, as well as poppy seeds, are generally considered harmless.

People differ in the amounts and types of foods they can eat. Decisions about diet should be made based on what works best for each person. Keeping a food diary may help identify individual items in one's diet.

Diverticulitis

Treatment for diverticulitis focuses on clearing up the infection and inflammation, resting the colon, and preventing or minimizing complications. An attack of diverticulitis without complications may respond to antibiotics within a few days if treated early. To help the colon rest, the doctor may recommend bed rest and a liquid diet, along with a pain reliever. An acute attack with severe pain or severe infection may require a hospital stay. Most acute cases of diverticulitis are treated with antibiotics and a liquid diet. The antibiotics are given by injection into a vein. In some cases, however, surgery may be necessary.

