



Diverticulosis / Diverticulitis

Diverticulosis is the presence of weak areas or pouches in the wall of the large intestine. The pouches are usually in the part of the large intestine called the colon. The pouches, called diverticula, look somewhat like small thumbs poking out of the side of the colon. Unfortunately diverticulosis is a common condition - more than half of all elderly people in the U.S. have it due to a high fat, low fiber diet that plagues our society.

Cause

Diverticula seem to occur when the pressure inside the colon is too high. There are several ways this pressure may become high. The main cause of high pressure appears to be too little fiber in the diet. Fiber helps keep digested food bulky and soft as it passes through the colon. This makes it easier for the food to move through the intestine without too much pressure.

Sometimes the muscles of the large intestine do not work correctly. As digested food moves through the colon, muscle spasms may occur in the colon, causing increased pressure. People who have irritable bowel syndrome (also called spastic colon) appear to have a higher risk of developing diverticulosis because of problems with muscle spasms.

Symptoms

Many people who have diverticulosis do not have any symptoms. If they do have symptoms, abdominal pain is the most common one. The pain is usually in the lower left abdomen. You may feel the pain most of the time, or it may come and go. You may also have more bowel gas or constipation. Diverticulosis can also cause painless bleeding from the rectum. Bleeding is less common than other symptoms.

When inflammation or infection occurs in or around the pouches, it is called diverticulitis. If you have fever as well as abdominal pain, you may have developed diverticulitis. You should see your family doctor if this happens.

Diagnosis

Diverticula are best seen with a special intestinal x-ray called a barium enema. In fact, diverticulosis may be discovered when you have this test for some other medical problem. Barium is put into your rectum and colon. The barium then shows the outline of the large intestine on the x-ray.

Flexible sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy are other procedures that can find diverticula. The doctor inserts a scope into your rectum. The scope is a thin, flexible, lighted tube allowing your doctor to look inside your large intestine.

Treatment

Most importantly, you need to have more fiber in your diet. [See our food fiber content guide](#). You can do this by eating more whole-grain products, such as whole-wheat and bran breads, cereals, and muffins. Also eat more fruits and vegetables. In addition, high-fiber dietary supplements may be helpful.

Avoid eating foods that may get stuck in diverticula, such as popcorn, raisins, whole-kernel corn, cucumber seeds, and peanuts.

If muscle spasms in the colon are a problem, your family doctor may prescribe medication to stop the spasms.

If you have diverticulosis, you should always watch for symptoms of diverticulitis. See your family doctor right away if you have fever and abdominal pain.

Time Course

The pouches in the wall of the colon are permanent. Symptoms caused by these pouches may come and go. When you do have symptoms, they may last a few days or longer. Often symptoms can be prevented by having a healthy diet and enough physical activity.

Diverticulosis Prevention

The best way to try to avoid diverticulosis is to do the things that help you have bowel movements that are soft and easy to pass: Eat a healthy diet with lots of fiber - the American Cancer Society recommends at least 50 grams a day! [Start today](#) with our fiber article.

- Drink a lot of fluids.
- Get regular exercise (apart from daily household activities or at work) at least 3 days per week, and more is better.

Diverticulitis

Diverticulitis occurs when you have weak areas or pouches in the wall of your large intestine and the pouches become inflamed. These pouches are called diverticula. They look somewhat like small thumbs poking out of the side of the bowel. They most commonly occur in the colon. The presence of diverticula in

the colon is called diverticulosis. You are more likely to have these pouches as you get older.

Inflammation occurs when diverticula become blocked with stool. Occasionally, when the inflammation is severe, a hole (perforation) may form in the wall of the intestine. Rarely, perforation may lead to peritonitis, which is inflammation of the lining of the abdomen, a potentially serious condition.

Symptoms of diverticulitis may include: Alternating diarrhea and constipation

- Severe, intermittent cramps in the lower left side of the abdomen
- Tenderness in the lower left side of the abdomen
- Chills or fever
- Rectal bleeding.

Diagnosis

The doctor will review your symptoms and examine you. He or she may also use the following procedures:

- Blood tests.
- Sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy (exam of the rectum and lower end of the large intestine with a lighted viewing instrument).
- Barium enema (other procedures used to examine the intestines and colon).
- CT Scan of the abdomen.

Treatment

For uncomplicated diverticulosis, the doctor may recommend a high-fiber diet and possibly use of stool softeners.

For an attack of acute diverticulitis, you may be treated at home with a combination of oral antibiotics if your physician feels you are not acutely ill. If you are ill enough to be hospitalized, then your treatment will include antibiotics, intravenous fluids, and nasogastric suction (a procedure that relieves pressure in the intestine).

In most cases requiring surgery, the diseased section of the intestine is removed and the remaining sections are joined together. In some patients, a temporary colostomy is required. A colostomy is an operation to bring part of the large intestine to the abdominal surface to form a new opening for bowel movements.

Timeline

Diverticulitis is usually mild and should respond well to antibiotics and changes in diet.

Self care Use a source of heat such as a hot water bottle for cramps.

- If you have diarrhea, drink liquids and avoid solid foods. Try to rest until the diarrhea stops.
- When your symptoms are gone, eat bland, low-fiber foods at first and return to normal eating gradually.
- Take all the medicine prescribed by the doctor. If you stop taking antibiotics when your symptoms are gone but before the scheduled end of treatment, the symptoms may return.

If your symptoms worsen, contact your doctor.

Recurrence prevention Follow your doctor's prescribed treatments for diverticulitis and diverticulosis.

- Eat regular, nutritious meals containing high-fiber foods, such as fruits and vegetables.
- Drink plenty of water, as much as 8 glasses a day.
- Watch for changes in bowel movements (from constipation to diarrhea).
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Do not eat indigestible seeds such as popcorn kernels. Avoid other foods that may get stuck in diverticula, such as raisins, whole-kernel corn, and peanuts.
- Contact your doctor if symptoms return.

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