

Diverticulosis and Diverticulitis

Most people have in their colons small pouches 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 are diverticula. The condition of having diverticula is called diverticulosis. About half of all Americans age 60 to 80, and almost everyone over age 80, have diverticulosis.

When the pouches become infected or inflamed, the condition is called diverticulitis. This happens in 10 to 25 percent of people with diverticulosis. Diverticulosis and diverticulitis are also called diverticular disease.

What Causes Diverticular Disease?

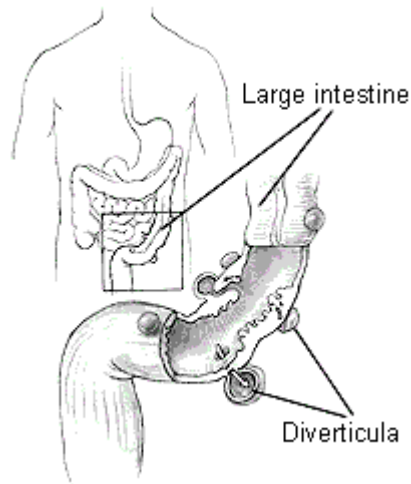
Doctors believe a low-fiber diet is the main cause of diverticular disease. The disease was first noticed in the United States in the early 1900's. At about the same time, processed foods were introduced to the American diet. Many processed foods contain refined, low-fiber flour. Unlike whole-wheat flour, 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. The excess pressure causes 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 and without warning.



What Are the Symptoms?

Diverticulosis

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 troubling symptoms.

Diverticulitis

The most common symptom of diverticulitis is abdominal pain. The most common sign is tenderness around the left side of the lower abdomen. If infection is the cause, fever, nausea, vomiting, chills, cramping, and constipation may occur as well. The severity of symptoms depends on the extent of the infection and complications.

What Is the Treatment for Diverticular Disease?

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. The American Dietetic Association recommends 20 to 35 grams of fiber each day. Attached is a reference guide that shows the amount of fiber in different foods that you can easily add to your diet.

The doctor may also recommend drinking a fiber product such as Citrucel or Metamucil once-a-day. These products are mixed with water and provide about 4 to 6 grams of fiber for an 8-ounce glass.

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, this is now a controversial point and no evidence supports this recommendation.

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. In some cases, however, surgery may be necessary.

Points to Remember

- Diverticulosis occurs when small pouches, called diverticula, bulge outward through weak spots in the colon (large intestine).
- The pouches form when pressure inside the colon builds, usually because of constipation.
- The main cause of diverticulosis is a low-fiber diet because it increases constipation and pressure inside the colon.
- Most people with diverticulosis never have any discomfort or symptoms.
- Diverticulitis occurs when the pouches get infected or inflamed and cause pain and tenderness around the left side of the lower abdomen.
- For most people with diverticulosis, eating a high-fiber diet is the only treatment needed.
- You can increase your fiber intake by eating these foods: whole grain breads, cereals, and other products; fruit such as berries, apples, and peaches; and vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, spinach, carrots, asparagus, and squash; and beans.