

CROHN'S DISEASE

Definition

Crohn's disease is an inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). It causes inflammation of the lining of your digestive tract, which can lead to abdominal pain, severe diarrhea and even malnutrition. Inflammation caused by Crohn's disease can involve different areas of the digestive tract in different people.

The inflammation caused by Crohn's disease often spreads deep into the layers of affected bowel tissue. Like ulcerative colitis, another common IBD, Crohn's disease can be both painful and debilitating, and sometimes may lead to life-threatening complications.

While there's no known cure for Crohn's disease, therapies can greatly reduce the signs and symptoms of Crohn's disease and even bring about long-term remission. With treatment, many people with Crohn's disease can function well.

Symptoms

Inflammation of Crohn's disease may involve different areas in different people. In some people, just the small intestine is affected. In others, it's confined to the colon (part of the large intestine). The most common areas affected by Crohn's disease are the last part of the small intestine (ileum) and the colon. Inflammation may be confined to the bowel wall, which can lead to scarring (stenosis), or inflammation may spread through the bowel wall (fistula).

Signs and symptoms of Crohn's disease can range from mild to severe and may develop gradually or come on suddenly, without warning. You may also have periods of time when you have no signs or symptoms (remission). When the disease is active, signs and symptoms may include:

- **Diarrhea:** The inflammation that occurs in Crohn's disease causes cells in the affected areas of your intestine to secrete large amounts of water and salt. Because the colon can't completely absorb this excess fluid, you develop diarrhea. Intensified intestinal cramping also can contribute to loose stools. Diarrhea is a common problem for people with Crohn's.
- **Abdominal pain and cramping:** Inflammation and ulceration may cause the walls of portions of your bowel to swell and eventually thicken with scar tissue. This affects the normal movement of contents through your digestive tract and may lead to pain and cramping.

Mild Crohn's disease usually causes slight to moderate intestinal discomfort, but in more serious cases, the pain may be severe and include nausea and vomiting.

- **Blood in your stool:** Food moving through your digestive tract may cause inflamed tissue to bleed, or your bowel may also bleed on its own. You might notice bright red blood in the toilet bowl or darker blood mixed with your stool. You can also have bleeding you don't see (occult blood).
- **Ulcers:** Crohn's disease can cause small sores on the surface of the intestine that eventually become large ulcers that penetrate deep into — and sometimes through — the intestinal walls. You may also have ulcers in your mouth similar to canker sores.
- **Reduced appetite and weight loss:** Abdominal pain and cramping and the inflammatory reaction in the wall of your bowel can affect both your appetite and your ability to digest and absorb food.

Other signs and symptoms

People with severe Crohn's disease may also experience:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Arthritis
- Eye inflammation
- Mouth sores
- Skin disorders
- Inflammation of the liver or bile ducts
- Delayed growth or sexual development, in children

When to see a doctor

See your doctor if you have persistent changes in your bowel habits or if you have any of the signs and symptoms of Crohn's disease, such as:

- Abdominal pain
- Blood in your stool
- Ongoing bouts of diarrhea that don't respond to over-the-counter (OTC) medications

Causes

The exact cause of Crohn's disease remains unknown. Previously, diet and stress were suspected, but now doctors know that although these factors may aggravate existing Crohn's disease, they don't cause it. Now, researchers believe that many factors, such as heredity and a malfunctioning immune system, play a role in the development of Crohn's disease.

- **Immune system:** It's possible that a virus or bacterium may trigger Crohn's disease. When your immune system tries to fight off the invading microorganism, an abnormal immune response causes the immune system to attack the cells in the digestive tract, too.
- **Heredity:** Crohn's is more common in people who have family members with the disease, leading experts to suspect that one or more genes may make people more susceptible to Crohn's disease. However, most people with Crohn's disease don't have a family history of the disease.

Risk factors

Risk factors for Crohn's disease may include:

- **Age:** Crohn's disease can occur at any age, but you're likely to develop the condition when you're young. Most people who develop Crohn's disease are diagnosed before they're 30 years old.
- **Ethnicity:** Although whites have the highest risk of the disease, it can affect any ethnic group. If you're of Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jewish descent, your risk is even higher.
- **Family history:** You're at higher risk if you have a close relative, such as a parent, sibling or child, with the disease. As many as 1 in 5 people with Crohn's disease has a family member with the disease.
- **Cigarette smoking:** Cigarette smoking is the most important controllable risk factor for developing Crohn's disease. Smoking also leads to more severe disease and a greater risk of surgery. If you smoke, stop. Discuss this with your doctor and get help. There are many smoking-cessation programs available if you are unable to quit on your own.
- **Where you live:** If you live in an urban area or in an industrialized country, you're more likely to develop Crohn's disease. Because Crohn's disease occurs more often among people living in cities and industrial nations, it may be that environmental factors, including a diet high in fat or refined foods, play a role in Crohn's disease. People living in northern climates also seem to have a greater risk of the disease.

Complications

Crohn's disease may lead to one or more of the following complications:

- **Bowel obstruction:** Crohn's disease affects the thickness of the intestinal wall. Over time, parts of the bowel can thicken and narrow, which may block the flow of digestive contents through the affected part of your intestine. Some cases require surgery to remove the diseased portion of your bowel.
- **Ulcers:** Chronic inflammation can lead to open sores (ulcers) anywhere in your digestive tract, including your mouth and anus, and in the genital area (perineum) and anus.
- **Fistulas:** Sometimes ulcers can extend completely through the intestinal wall, creating a fistula — an abnormal connection between different parts of your intestine, between your intestine and skin, or between your intestine and another organ, such as the bladder or vagina. When internal fistulas develop, food may bypass areas of the bowel that are necessary for absorption. An external fistula can cause continuous drainage of bowel contents to your skin, and in some cases, a fistula may become infected and form an abscess, a problem that can be life-threatening if left untreated. Fistulas around the anal area (perianal) are the most common kind of fistula.
- **Anal fissure:** This is a crack, or cleft, in the anus or in the skin around the anus where infections can occur. It's often associated with painful bowel movements. This may lead to perianal fistula.
- **Malnutrition:** Diarrhea, abdominal pain and cramping may make it difficult for you to eat or for your intestine to absorb enough nutrients to keep you nourished. Additionally, anemia is common in people with Crohn's disease.
- **Colon cancer:** Having Crohn's disease that affects your colon increases your risk of colon cancer.
- **Other health problems:** In addition to inflammation and ulcers in the digestive tract, Crohn's disease can cause problems in other parts of the body, such as arthritis, inflammation of the eyes or skin, clubbing of the fingernails, kidney stones, gallstones and, occasionally, inflammation of the bile ducts. People with long-standing Crohn's disease also may develop osteoporosis, a condition that causes weak, brittle bones.

Lifestyle and home remedies

Sometimes you may feel helpless when facing Crohn's disease. But changes in your diet and lifestyle may help control your symptoms and lengthen the time between flare-ups.

Diet

There's no firm evidence that what you eat actually causes inflammatory bowel disease. But certain foods and beverages can aggravate your signs and symptoms, especially during a flare-up.

If you think eating certain foods make your condition worse, keep a food diary to keep track of what you're eating as well as how you feel. If you discover some foods are causing your symptoms to flare, it's a good idea to try eliminating those foods. Here are some suggestions that may help:

- **Limit dairy products:** Like many people with inflammatory bowel disease, you may find that problems, such as diarrhea, abdominal pain and gas, improve when you limit or eliminate dairy products. You may be lactose intolerant — that is, your body

can't digest the milk sugar (lactose) in dairy foods. If so, limiting dairy or using an enzyme product, such as Lactaid, will help break down lactose.

- Try low-fat foods: If you have Crohn's disease of the small intestine, you may not be able to digest or absorb fat normally. Instead, fat passes through your intestine, making your diarrhea worse. Foods that may be especially troublesome include butter, margarine, cream sauces and fried foods.
- Limit fibre, if it's a problem food: For most people, high-fibre foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains, are the foundation of a healthy diet. But if you have inflammatory bowel disease, fibre may make diarrhea, pain and gas worse. Try steaming, baking or stewing raw fruits and vegetables if they bother you. You may also find that you can tolerate some fruits and vegetables, but not others. In general, you may have more problems with foods in the cabbage family, such as broccoli and cauliflower, and nuts, seeds, corn and popcorn.
- Avoid problem foods: Eliminate any other foods that seem to make your signs and symptoms worse.
- These may include "gassy" foods such as beans, cabbage and broccoli, raw fruit juices and fruits, spicy food, popcorn, alcohol, and foods and drinks that contain caffeine, such as chocolate and soda.
- Eat small meals: You may find you feel better eating five or six small meals a day rather than two or three larger ones.
- Drink plenty of liquids: Try to drink plenty of fluids daily. Water is best. Alcohol and beverages that contain caffeine stimulates your intestines and can make diarrhea worse, while carbonated drinks frequently produce gas.
- Consider multivitamins: Because Crohn's disease can interfere with your ability to absorb nutrients and because your diet may be limited, multivitamin and mineral supplements are often helpful. Check with your doctor before taking any vitamins or supplements.
- Talk to a dietitian: If you begin to lose weight or your diet has become very limited, talk to a registered dietitian.

Smoking

Smoking increases your risk of developing Crohn's disease, and once you have it, smoking can make the condition worse. People with Crohn's disease who smoke are more likely to have relapses, need medications and repeat surgeries. Quitting smoking can improve the overall health of your digestive tract, as well as provide many other health benefits.

Stress

Although stress doesn't cause Crohn's disease, it can make your signs and symptoms worse and may trigger flare-ups.

Stressful events can range from minor annoyances to a move, job loss or the death of a loved one.

When you're stressed your normal digestive process changes.

Your stomach empties more slowly and secretes more acid. Stress can also speed or slow the passage of intestinal contents. It may also cause changes in intestinal tissue itself.

Although it's not always possible to avoid stress, you can learn ways to help manage it. Some of these includes:

- Exercise: Even mild exercise can help reduce stress, relieve depression and normalize bowel function. Talk to your doctor about an exercise plan that's right for you.
- Biofeedback: This stress-reduction technique may help you reduce muscle tension and slow your heart rate with the help of a feedback machine. You're then taught how to produce these changes without feedback from the machine. The goal is to help you enter a relaxed state so that you can cope more easily with stress. Biofeedback is usually taught in hospitals and medical centers.

Regular relaxation and breathing exercises: One way to cope with stress is to regularly relax and use techniques such as deep, slow breathing to calm down. You can take classes in yoga and meditation or use books, CDs or DVDs at home.

Alternative medicine

Many people with digestive disorders have used some form of complementary or alternative therapy. Some commonly used therapies include:

- Herbal and nutritional supplements
- Probiotics
- Fish oil
- Acupuncture

Side effects and ineffectiveness of conventional therapies are primary reasons for seeking alternative care.

The majority of alternative therapies aren't regulated by the PMB regulations. Manufacturers can claim that their therapies are safe and effective but don't need to prove it. In some cases that means you'll end up paying for products that don't work. For example, studies done on fish oil and on probiotics for the treatment of Crohn's haven't shown benefits to using these products. What's more, even natural herbs and supplements can have side effects and cause dangerous interactions. Tell your doctor if you decide to try any herbal supplement.

Some people may find acupuncture or hypnosis helpful for the management of Crohn's, but neither therapy has been well studied for this use.

Unlike probiotics — which are beneficial live bacteria that you consume — prebiotics are natural compounds found in plants, such as artichokes, that help fuel beneficial intestinal bacteria. An initial study on prebiotics had promising results. More studies are underway.

Coping and support

Receiving a diagnosis of Crohn's disease can be worrisome. Crohn's disease doesn't just affect you physically — it takes an emotional toll as well. If signs and symptoms are severe, your life may revolve around a constant need to run to the toilet. In some cases, you may barely be able to leave the house. When you do, you might worry about an accident, and this anxiety only makes your symptoms worse.

Even if your symptoms are mild, gas and abdominal pain can make it difficult to be out in public. You may also feel hampered by dietary restrictions or embarrassed by the nature of your disease. All of these factors — isolation, embarrassment and anxiety — can severely alter your life. Sometimes they may lead to depression.

Educate yourself, and connect

One of the best ways to be more in control is to find out as much as possible about Crohn's disease.

Although support groups aren't for everyone, they can provide valuable information about your condition as well as emotional support. Group members frequently know about the latest medical treatments or integrative therapies. You may also find it reassuring to be among people who understand what you're going through.

Some people find it helpful to consult a psychologist or psychiatrist who's familiar with inflammatory bowel disease and the emotional difficulties that it can cause. Although living with Crohn's disease can be discouraging, research is ongoing and the outlook is brighter than it was a few years ago.

Source: The Mayo Clinic

Contact us

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