

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) describes conditions in which the intestine becomes inflamed (red and swollen). This leads to symptoms such as diarrhoea which may be watery and contain blood, abdominal pain and cramps, loss of appetite and weight loss, tiredness and fatigue.

Two major types of IBD are Crohn's disease and Ulcerative colitis. These are autoimmune diseases, where the body attacks the digestive system.

- Crohn's disease can occur in any part of the intestine.
- Ulcerative colitis only affects the large intestine (colon).

Although IBD is a chronic condition, symptoms may not be present all the time, depending on the severity of the inflammation. These diseases can be treated successfully with medication, although sometimes surgery is necessary.

Investigations and diagnosis

The two conditions (Crohn's and Ulcerative colitis) are treated differently. Ulcerative colitis causes inflammation only in the lower digestive tract (large bowel, rectum, or both), while Crohn's disease may cause inflammation anywhere in the digestive tract, including the mouth and anus. Another difference is that, in Crohn's disease, inflamed segments of the intestine may be separated by healthy segments, giving the condition characteristic 'skip lesions'.

The first part of the diagnosis involves the doctor taking a full medical and family history. A thorough physical examination is also conducted. Blood tests may be ordered to look for a low blood count (anaemia) that may result from rectal bleeding, to measure the severity of inflammation, and to detect vitamin or mineral deficiencies. A bowel motion specimen may be needed to exclude infection as the cause of the symptoms being experienced.

Most people require part of their intestine to be examined, either by direct or indirect inspection. Direct inspection is carried out by endoscopy - a procedure in which a small flexible tube (endoscope) with a fibre-optic camera at its tip is inserted through the anus (colonoscopy* or sigmoidoscopy) or mouth (gastroscopy*). The doctor is able to see the lining of the rectum and colon and can look for signs of inflammation that may indicate Crohn's disease. Small samples (biopsies) of the lining of digestive tract can be taken for analysis. Endoscopic visualization and biopsy are essential in the diagnosis of Crohn's disease.

A CT scan, and barium X-ray studies may also be helpful in making a diagnosis.

**see colonoscopy info sheet*

**see gastroscopy info sheet*

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Treatment & Medications

Medications can relieve the symptoms of Crohn's disease and reduce the chances that complications develop by bringing the inflammation under control. Controlling the inflammation gives the digestive tract an opportunity to heal.

Because Crohn's disease is a chronic condition, many people will need to take medications for long periods of time, either to bring the disease under control or to maintain remission once the symptoms have disappeared.

A combination of medications is often required. The choice of medications used depends on the location of the inflammation, the severity of symptoms, and whether the aim is to treat a flare-up or to prevent further flare-ups. The types of side effects experienced, which can vary for different people, may also be a factor in the choice of medication used.

Four main categories of medication are used to treat inflammation in Crohn's disease:

Anti-inflammatory agents, Antibiotics, Immunomodulators, Disease-modifying agents.

Other medications may be prescribed to address specific symptoms such as chronic diarrhoea and abdominal cramps.

Surgery

Major surgery, called resection, may be needed to remove severely inflamed or damaged portions of the small or large intestines. Abscesses or fistulae around the anus can be treated using local surgical drainage procedures.

Diet

If Crohn's disease is present in the small intestine it can impair the digestion and absorption of essential nutrients from food passing through the digestive tract.

A well-balanced and nutritious diet is essential for anyone with Crohn's disease to prevent malnutrition and maintain good health. Vitamins (eg: vitamin D) and minerals (eg: iron and calcium) supplements might be necessary in some people.

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