

# Diverticulitis

## What is diverticulitis?

Diverticula are small outpouches of the bowel lining that protrude through the muscle layer of the bowel. Diverticula most commonly occur in the colon. The presence of diverticula in the colon is called diverticulosis. The incidence of diverticulosis increases with age and affects half of those over the age of 80 in the U.S. Diverticulitis occurs when diverticula become inflamed.

## How does it occur?

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.

## What are the symptoms?

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.

## How is it diagnosed?

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

- sigmoidoscopy (exam of the rectum and lower end of the large intestine with a lighted viewing instrument)
- colonoscopy or barium enema (other procedures used to examine the intestines and colon)
- blood tests.

## How is it treated?

For uncomplicated diverticulosis the doctor may recommend a high-fiber diet and possibly use of stool softeners. For an attack of acute diverticulitis, you will probably be hospitalized. Your treatment would include antibiotics, intravenous fluids, and nasogastric suction (a procedure that relieves pressure on 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.

## How long will the effects last?

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

## How can I take care of myself?

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.

It is important to 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.

## How can I help prevent recurrence of diverticulitis?

Follow your doctor's prescribed treatment to clear up the infection and prevent recurrence.

In addition:

- 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.
- Contact the doctor if symptoms return.