
Diverticular Disease

~ Diverticulosis and Diverticulitis ~

What is diverticular disease?

Diverticular disease is a medical word that describes problems called diverticulosis and diverticulitis.

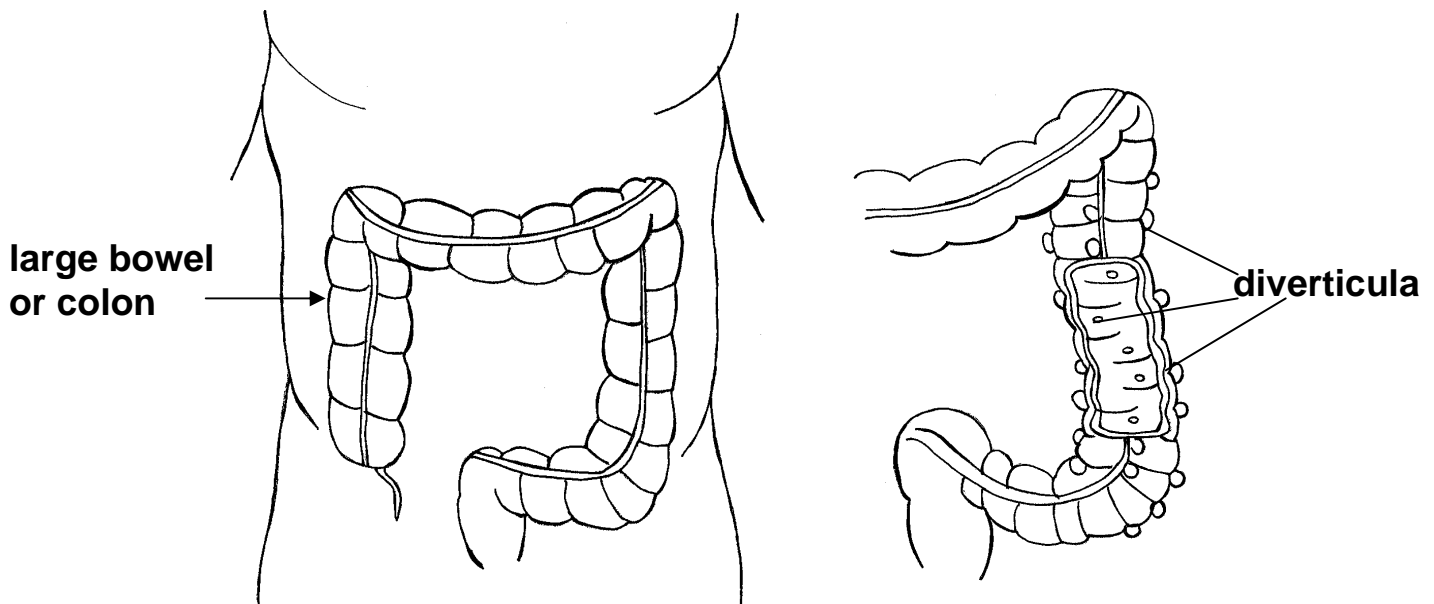
What is diverticulosis?

Each person has a large bowel inside his or her abdomen. The large bowel is also called a colon. As the food you eat travels along the bowel your body takes out nutrients and water and puts back waste products.

The large colon can have small pouches bulging out at weak spots:

- One pouch is called a diverticulum.
- Many pouches are called diverticula.

You have diverticulosis when you have many pouches.



What is diverticulitis?

Diverticulitis is the word used when the pouches become infected or inflamed. This happens to about 25% of people who have diverticulosis.

What causes diverticular disease?

No one knows the cause. We do know that it is common to have pouches after the age of 60. Doctors think that a low fibre diet may be one cause of diverticular disease.

What is fibre?

Fibre is the part of fruit, vegetables and grain products that the body cannot digest. There are 2 types of fibre:

- Soluble fibre dissolves in water to form a gel.
- Insoluble fibre does not dissolve in water and passes through the colon unchanged.

Both types of fibre help make stools soft and easy to pass. They prevent constipation.

When you have a low fibre diet, you may be constipated. The muscles in your colon have to strain to move stool along. This increases pressure in the colon causing weak spots over time. The weak spots begin to bulge causing diverticula.

Doctors think that the diverticula may become inflamed and infected when the stool gets caught in the pouches. The bacteria in the stool, causes inflammation called diverticulitis.

What symptoms will I feel?

When you have diverticulosis you may not have any discomfort, pain or other symptoms. You may have changes in your bowel function. You may have mild cramps, bloating and constipation.

When you have diverticulitis you may have tenderness or pain in the left lower part of your abdomen. If you have an infection or a blockage, you may have a fever, nausea, vomiting, chills and cramping.

Are there any other problems?

Diverticulitis can lead to problems such as abscess, blockages, tears, bleeding or infection in the abdomen. These problems need to be treated right away.

How do I know I have diverticular disease?

Your doctor will ask about your medical history. You will be asked about your bowel habits, your symptoms, medications and diet. You will have a physical exam done which includes a rectal exam. The doctor may ask you to bring in a stool sample for testing.

You may have blood tests to check for infection and may need some other tests done as well. Tests may include an x-ray, ultrasound, or CT scan. These will be explained to you if ordered. You may also have a colonoscopy. This is an exam where the doctor looks inside the colon. There is a handout that explains this procedure.

What is the treatment for diverticulosis?

Treatment includes a high fibre diet and medications for pain when needed. If there is no improvement after outpatient treatment you may need to come into the hospital. Treatment may include having a thin tube in a vein in your arm called an IV. This gives you fluids to replace fluids lost. You may need to take antibiotic or other medication. You may need to have surgery.

High fibre diet

Fibre keeps the stool soft so it can move along the colon smoothly. You should have about 25 to 35 grams of fibre each day. Fibre is found in fruit, vegetables and whole grain products. You will also need to drink at least 2 litres of fluid a day. However, if you have kidney or heart problems, the dietitian will tell you how much fluid you can safely have. You should meet with a dietitian to talk about your diet.

Your doctor or dietitian may want you to have a high fibre product such as Citrucel[®] or Metamucil[®] once a day. ✘ Do not take any of these products without your doctor or dietitian telling you to. When taking this product you need to drink lots of water to keep stool soft. However, if you have kidney or heart problems, your doctor or dietitian will tell you how much you can safely drink.

Pain medication

Your doctor may prescribe pain control medication. Some pain control medications cause more problems so it is very important to follow your doctor's advice.

What is the treatment for diverticulitis?

Treatment includes medications to clear up the infection and control inflammation, resting the colon and preventing complications.

Medications

Antibiotic medications can help infection if started early.

Resting the colon

If you have severe, acute diverticulitis, you may need to be in the hospital. Treatment may include having a thin tube in a vein in your arm called an IV. This gives you fluids and helps rest the bowel for 48 to 72 hours. You may also antibiotic or other medication. Pain control medication may help to control muscle spasms in the colon.

After resting the bowel for 48 to 72 hours, you start on a liquid diet and we see how you manage. Your diet slowly changes and you can eat more. You move to a low residue, high fibre diet next. When your symptoms improve you can drink more and eat more high fibre food. Members of your health care team will help you learn more about your diet and the amount of fluid to drink.

When is surgery needed?

Surgery may be needed when you have severe or frequent problems. The surgeon removes the parts of the colon that are causing problems. This is called a colon resection.

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