

Crohn's Disease

General Information

Crohn's disease is an inflammation of the deep layers of the intestine wall. It is one of a group of chronic (long-lasting) disorders that causes inflammation or ulcers in the small and large intestines. Together, these disorders are known as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

Crohn's disease most often involves the lower part of the small intestine (called the ileum). The small and large intestine (colon or bowel) can also be affected. The inflammation can also affect the mouth, esophagus, stomach, duodenum, appendix or anus.

Crohn's disease can cause symptoms similar to other conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome. The correct diagnosis may take some time to determine accurately.

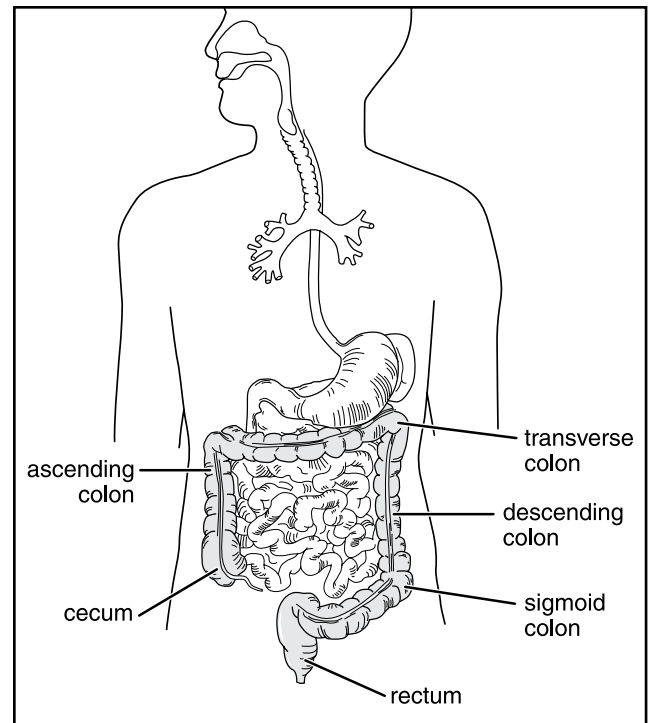
This disorder can reoccur at any time in your life. It is possible to go years between symptoms. There is no way to predict when the symptoms will reappear.

Symptoms of Crohn's Disease

The following are symptoms of Crohn's disease:

- abdominal pain and cramping (often in the lower right of the abdomen)
- diarrhea
- rectal bleeding
- weight loss
- fever.

Serious bleeding can lead to anemia (low red blood cell count).



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The digestive system.

The most common complication (side effect) of Crohn's disease is blockage of the intestine. Crohn's disease tends to thicken the bowel wall with swelling and scar tissue. It can also cause deep ulcer tunnels (called fistulas) that go through the bowel wall into nearby tissue.

There can also be pockets of infection with those tunnels. The areas around the anus and rectum are often involved. Sometimes fistulas can be treated with medicine, but in many cases they must be treated with surgery.

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Causes of Crohn's Disease

The exact cause of Crohn's disease is unknown. It may be an abnormal response from your immune system to the bacteria that normally live in your intestine.

Crohn's disease equally affects men and women, often between the ages of 15 and 35 years old. Crohn's disease appears to run in families.

How to Diagnose Crohn's Disease

If you have the symptoms of Crohn's disease, your health care provider will take your medical history and give you a physical exam. This exam will include blood tests to see if you have low number of red blood cells (anemia) or high number of white blood cells (swelling or infection).

A stool sample can show if you have blood loss or if the symptoms are caused by bacteria or a parasite.

Your health care provider may use an endoscope (flexible tube) to look inside your rectum and colon. During the exam, they may take a tissue sample (biopsy) from the lining of your colon and look at this sample under a microscope.

Your health care provider may also want to take X-rays of your digestive tract. These X-rays may include an upper gastrointestinal series, a small intestinal study and a barium enema intestinal X-ray.

If your health care provider confirms Crohn's disease, you may need medical care for a long time. You will likely have tests done on a regular basis.

Treatment

There is no cure for Crohn's disease, but there are many medicines available to help control it. Treatment often includes making diet changes, controlling inflammation and relieving abdominal pain, diarrhea and rectal bleeding. Your health care provider will talk with you about medicines and possible side effects.

Although there is no special diet to prevent or treat Crohn's disease, there are some foods (such as milk, alcohol, hot spices or fiber) that can make the symptoms worse. Eat a well-balanced diet and avoid foods that make your symptoms worse. Do not take large doses of vitamins.

Although stress doesn't cause Crohn's disease, it may add to flare ups and make symptoms worse. Try to reduce stress through regular exercise, yoga, massage or meditation. Try deep breathing and any activity you find relaxing.

**Information adapted from the
National Institute of Diabetes and
Digestive and Kidney Diseases.**