

Diverticulosis - Topic Overview

What is diverticulosis?

Diverticulosis is a condition that develops when pouches, diverticula, form in the wall of the colon, part of the large intestine. These pouches may be up to 0.25 in. or larger in diameter.

In diverticulosis, the pouches in the colon wall do not cause symptoms. Because of this, as many as 80% of the people who have diverticulosis never realize it. Diverticulosis may not be discovered unless symptoms develop, such as in painful diverticular disease or diverticulitis. In many cases, diverticulosis is discovered only when tests are done to find the cause of a different medical problem or during a screening exam.

Painful diverticular disease causes abdominal pain and cramping, especially on the left side. However, there is no fever or other sign of inflammation. The symptoms of and treatment for painful diverticular disease are the same as for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). In fact, many doctors think that a person with painful diverticular disease actually has both diverticulosis and IBS, and the symptoms are from IBS. For more information, see the topic Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

What causes diverticulosis?

The reason pouches (diverticula) form in the colon wall is not completely understood. Doctors think diverticula form when high pressure inside the colon pushes against weak spots in the colon wall.

Normally, a diet with adequate fiber (also called roughage) produces stool that is bulky and can move easily through the colon. If a diet is low in fiber, the colon must exert more pressure than usual to move small, hard stool. A low-fiber diet also can increase the time stool remains in the bowel, adding to the high pressure.

Pouches may form when the high pressure pushes against weak spots in the colon where blood vessels pass through the muscle layer of the bowel wall to supply blood to the inner wall.

What are the symptoms?

Most people don't have symptoms. You may have had diverticulosis for years by the time symptoms develop (if they do). Over time, some people develop an infection in the pouches (diverticulitis). For more information, see the topic Diverticulitis.

The symptoms of **painful diverticular disease** are the same as those of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), including diarrhea and cramping abdominal pain, with no fever or other sign of an infection. For information on the symptoms of IBS, see the topic Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).

How is diverticulosis diagnosed?

In many cases, diverticulosis is discovered only when tests, such as a barium enema X-ray or a colonoscopy, are done to find the cause of a different medical problem or during a screening exam.

How is it treated?

If you have diverticulosis, you will be encouraged to eat a high-fiber diet and drink plenty of water to prevent constipation. Try eating more whole grains, leafy green vegetables, and fruits. You also may add fiber supplements such as Citrucel, Fibercon, and Metamucil. This treatment may help reduce the formation of new pouches (diverticula) and lower the risk of developing diverticulitis.

Treatment for **painful diverticular disease** involves adding fiber to the diet and eliminating any foods that cause gas, pain, or other symptoms. Treatment is the same as that for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), because many people who have this condition also have IBS. For information on the treatment of IBS, see the topic Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).

Can diverticulosis be prevented?

Eating a high-fiber diet, getting plenty of fluid, and exercising regularly may help prevent diverticulosis.