

# Diverticular Disease

## What Is Diverticular Disease?

Diverticular disease is a disorder of the large intestine (colon). The colon is the last part of the digestive tract. Food passes through it just before waste leaves the body as a bowel movement (stool). In diverticular disease, parts of the colon wall are weak. These weak places can puff out like small sacs (diverticula). Each sac is called a diverticulum. These parts can become red and swollen (inflamed) and even infected. Diverticulosis refers to the presence of diverticula in many places. Diverticulitis is the name for the disorder when diverticula become inflamed or infected. Diverticular disease can develop if food moves too slowly through the colon. Pressure in the colon from this food causes weak spots and sacs. Food moves too slowly when not enough fiber is in the diet or if muscle spasms occur in the colon. Fiber is found in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The colon is made of muscle, and during muscle spasms, the colon tightens. Food can't move easily through it, so a high pressure spots results. Diverticular disease is common, especially among older people.

## What Are the Symptoms of Diverticular Disease?

Many people have diverticular disease but feel fine. Diverticulosis can cause bowel cramps due to spasm but usually causes no symptoms. Diverticulitis causes one or more of these symptoms: bleeding from the bowel (red bowel movements), pain in the lower left abdomen, fever, difficulty having a bowel movement, and gas and bloating.

## How Is Diverticular Disease Diagnosed?

In people with abdominal pain, the doctor will want pictures of the colon. A computed tomography (CT) scan of the belly (abdomen) can be useful in suspected diverticulitis. A barium enema is older x-ray test, now rarely done, that can also identify diverticulosis. The best test is colonoscopy. A thin, bendable tube (endoscope, or scope) is inserted into the rectum and then the colon. The tube has a tiny camera that lets the doctor look for problem spots and take pictures. Before this test, a laxative must be taken to empty all food from the colon. When just the lower colon is checked, the test is called sigmoidoscopy. When the whole colon is checked, it is called colonoscopy.

## How Is Diverticular Disease Treated?

For diverticulosis, eating a high-fiber diet and avoiding nuts and seeds, which may become stuck in diverticula, are important. For diverticulitis, not eating for a few days rests the colon. Only liquids are taken until the colon heals. Antibiotics will treat the infection. Pain medicine may help, but take only the type the doctor recommends. Some types of pain medicine may worsen the condition. In severe cases, surgery may be needed to remove damaged colon.

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## DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Diverticular Disease:

- **DO** eat a high-fiber, low-salt, low-fat diet.
- **DO** drink enough fluids.
- **DO** proper physical activities.
- **DO** keep to the proper weight. Try to lose weight if you're overweight.
- **DO** maintain proper bowel habits (try to have a bowel movement daily).
- **DO** watch for blood in the stool or dark stool.
- **DO** watch for signs of diverticulitis and other complications.
- **DON'T** strain with bowel movements.
- **DON'T** use laxatives.

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