

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Jul 14, 2020

Diverticular disease

Diverticular disease is a common condition that can lead to painful cramps in your abdomen. Eating more fiber can sometimes help. There are also treatments that can improve your symptoms.

What happens?

Lots of people have small pouches of tissue that bulge outward from their gut wall. Doctors call these pouches **diverticula**. If you get symptoms because of these pouches, your doctor may say you have **diverticular disease**.

If these pouches become inflamed or infected, this is called **diverticulitis**. Sometimes diverticulitis can lead to more serious problems, such as a hole in your intestine or a blockage that stops you passing stools.

Diverticula are a bit like an inner tube that pokes through weak places in a tire. You can have just one of these pouches. But most people with diverticular disease have more than one. Some people have hundreds.

Although you can sometimes get these pouches in other places, such as your stomach, here we look only at diverticula in the last part of your large bowel (your colon). You may hear this called **colonic diverticular disease**.

No one knows exactly why people get diverticula. But you may be more likely to get them if you don't eat enough fiber. Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that your body can't digest.

What are the symptoms?

Most people with diverticula don't know they have these pouches, as they don't usually cause problems. Many people only find out they have diverticula when they're having tests for other conditions that affect their colon.

When diverticula do cause symptoms, the most common problems are painful cramps in the lower part of the abdomen, usually on the left side.

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The pain may come and go, or it may be constant. It often starts after you've had a meal and gets better when you pass gas or a stool. Other symptoms include:

- bloating
- constipation or diarrhea
- blood in your stool. The bleeding may be heavy. If you see blood in your stool you should see your doctor right away, as this can also be a sign of a more serious condition.

If one or more of these pouches become inflamed or infected (called **diverticulitis**), you may get other symptoms, such as:

- severe and constant pain in your lower abdomen, probably on your left side
- a fever
- nausea and vomiting.

The symptoms of diverticular disease and diverticulitis can resemble the symptoms of many other conditions. Your doctor will examine you and may test your blood for signs of inflammation and infection.

Depending on your symptoms, you may have other tests as well, such as a CT scan (a type of X-ray) or a colonoscopy. During a colonoscopy, doctors use a thin, flexible tube with a light and camera at the end to look at the inside of your colon.

What treatments work?

If your diverticula aren't causing problems

If you find out you have diverticula during tests for another condition and you don't have any symptoms, then you don't need any treatment. Your doctor may simply suggest that you eat plenty of high-fiber food, such as fruits and vegetables.

If your diverticula are causing mild symptoms

If your diverticula are causing mild symptoms, such as some cramping, your doctor will probably recommend:

- adding more fiber to your diet. This could involve eating more high-fiber foods and possibly taking a fiber supplement. You should also drink plenty of fluids.
- taking a course of antibiotics - if your doctor thinks you may have an infection.

If you have diverticulitis

If your diverticula are inflamed or infected, your doctor will recommend:

- taking antibiotics. You will probably take antibiotic pills for a few days. If you don't improve, you will probably need treatment in the hospital with antibiotics through a drip (an intravenous infusion or IV).
- taking pain medications to cope with any discomfort. These may be over-the-counter pain medicines, such as acetaminophen, or stronger medicines that require a prescription.

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- following a "low residue diet" until your symptoms improve. This means eating foods that are easily digested and absorbed, leaving little to pass out of your body in stools. Examples include white bread, white rice, vegetable and fruit juice without pulp, and dairy products. These are all low-fiber foods.

If you have complications from diverticulitis

Diverticulitis can sometimes lead to other problems (complications), such as

- heavy bleeding
- a sac of infected pus (an abscess) forming in the colon
- a blockage in the colon, or
- an abnormal opening (called a fistula) forming between the colon and another organ (such as the bladder).

These complications may require surgery to remove the affected part of the colon. However, sometimes other treatments can help. For example, a small abscess can sometimes be treated with antibiotics and a larger abscess can be drained.

What will happen to me?

Your symptoms may be mild and you may have long periods when you don't have any problems. Or, your condition may be more severe, with symptoms almost constantly.

If you have had diverticulitis and recovered without having surgery, you have about a 1 in 3 chance of having another attack within five years. Second attacks are usually more serious than first attacks and are harder to treat.

If you get repeated attacks, your doctor may suggest you have surgery to remove the affected part of your colon. This will help prevent more attacks.

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