

CROHN'S DISEASE

Crohn's disease is an *inflammation* (swelling, irritation) and *ulceration* (sores that do not easily heal) of the deep lining of the intestine. It usually affects the *ileum* (the lowest section of the small intestine) but may affect any part of the digestive tract. It can prevent water and nutrients from being properly absorbed into the bloodstream, and lead to bleeding and other problems. The cause is not known but there are several theories. Risk increases if another family member also has it, but this is not always the case. It may also be related to changes in the *immune system* (the body's defense system) and diet. Furthermore, stress can also aggravate Crohn's disease although it does not appear to cause it. It is most common in adolescents, young adults, and adults over 60.

Symptoms *may* include:

- Diarrhea
- Abdominal cramping and pain
- Bleeding from the rectum and *bloody stools* (dark-colored, "tarry", or with bright red blood)
- Weight loss, loss of appetite, nausea, and vomiting
- Fatigue and a fever
- Signs of *dehydration* (lethargy, sunken eyes, decreased urination, rapid weight loss or dry skin)

What *your doctor* can do:

- Diagnose the disease by asking about your symptoms and medical history, performing a physical exam and ordering laboratory blood and stool tests.
- Perform special X-rays or an *endoscopy* (use a long, thin, flexible tube with a light and optics to view and take tissue samples from the intestinal lining).
- Prescribe medications to decrease the inflammation and reduce the diarrhea.
- Perform a nutritional assessment and prescribe a special diet to help relieve your symptoms and to help you get the nutrition you need.
- Refer you to a registered dietician for nutritional counseling.
- Treat complications such as bleeding and infection.
- Recommend hospitalization when symptoms are severe. It may be necessary to let the digestive tract rest and have an intravenous (IV) line to provide fluids and nutrition.
- Recommend surgery if the disease is severe or to treat complications.

What *you* can do:

- Work closely with your doctor to determine the treatments that are best for you.
- Take the medicines prescribed by your doctor. Let your doctor know if you are having uncomfortable side effects. Do not stop your medicines without talking to your doctor first.
- Different foods and diets are best for different people with Crohn's disease. Foods you may need to avoid include caffeine (coffee, tea, and colas), spicy foods, milk products, and raw fruits and vegetables. Talk to your doctor about which diet best works for you.
- Try eating several small meals a day instead of three large ones.
- Keep appointments for regular check-ups even if you are not having symptoms.
- Contact the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation toll-free 1-800-932-2423 for more information.

What you can expect:

- Crohn's disease is a *chronic disease* with *remissions* (times when there are no symptoms) and *relapses* (times when the symptoms flare up again).
- Treatment can delay or control symptoms, but there is no cure.
- Complications may include severe blood loss, malnutrition, or obstruction of the bowel.

Contact your doctor if your symptoms worsen, you develop fever and chills, or if you have side effects from the treatment.