

Ulcerative Colitis: What You Should Know



Ulcerative colitis can occur in people of any age, but it usually starts between the ages of 15 and 30, and less frequently between 50 and 70 years of age. It affects men and women equally and appears to run in families, with reports of up to 20 percent of people with ulcerative colitis having a family member or relative with ulcerative colitis or Crohn's Disease.

Ulcerative colitis is a disease that causes inflammation and sores, called ulcers, in the lining of the rectum and colon. Ulcers form where inflammation has killed the cells that usually line the colon, then bleed and produce pus. Inflammation in the colon also causes the colon to empty frequently, causing diarrhea.

Ulcerative colitis is an inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), the general name for diseases that cause inflammation in the small intestine and colon. It can be difficult to diagnose because its symptoms are similar to other intestinal disorders and to another type of IBD called Crohn's Disease. Crohn's disease differs because it causes inflammation deeper within the intestinal wall and can occur in other parts of the digestive system including the small intestine, mouth, esophagus, and stomach.

What are the symptoms of ulcerative colitis?

The most common symptoms of ulcerative colitis are abdominal pain and bloody diarrhea. You may also experience:

- anemia
- weight loss
- loss of appetite
- rectal bleeding
- fatigue
- skin lesions
- joint pain
- growth failure
- loss of body fluids and nutrients

About half the people diagnosed have mild symptoms. Others suffer frequent fevers, bloody diarrhea, nausea, and severe abdominal cramps. Ulcerative colitis may also cause problems such as arthritis, inflammation of the eye, liver disease, and osteoporosis. It is not known why these problems occur outside the colon. Scientists think these complications may be the result of inflammation triggered by the immune system. Some of these problems go away when the colitis is treated.

What causes ulcerative colitis?

People with ulcerative colitis have abnormalities of the immune system, but doctors do not know whether these abnormalities are a cause or a result of the disease. The body's immune system is believed to react abnormally to the bacteria in the digestive tract.

Ulcerative colitis is not caused by emotional distress or sensitivity to certain foods or food products, but these factors may trigger symptoms in some people. The stress of living with ulcerative colitis may also contribute to a worsening of symptoms.

How is ulcerative colitis diagnosed and treated?

Many tests are used to diagnose ulcerative colitis. A physical exam and medical history are usually the first step. Blood tests may be done to check for anemia. A stool sample can be done to detect white blood cells. A colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy are the most accurate methods for making a diagnosis of ulcerative colitis and ruling out other possible conditions, such as Crohn's disease, diverticular disease, or cancer. Sometimes x-rays such as a barium enema or CT scans are also used. Treatment for ulcerative colitis depends upon the severity of the disease. Each person experiences ulcerative colitis differently, so treatment is adjusted for each individual.

- **Drug Therapy** – the goal of drug therapy is to induce and maintain remission, and to improve the quality of life
- **Hospitalization** – occasionally, symptoms are severe enough that a person must be hospitalized – a person may have severe bleeding or severe diarrhea that causes dehydration
- **Surgery** – about 25-40 percent of ulcerative colitis patients must eventually have their colons removed because of massive bleeding, severe illness, rupture of the colon, or risk of cancer.

Additional Resources

Crohn's & Colitis Foundation of America www.cdfa.org

National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse – a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases
<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov>

For More Information:

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