Inflammatory Bowel Disease: What You Should Know

Every year approximately 15,000 women in the U.S. are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and about 5,000 women lose their live to cervical cancer each year in the United States.

Inflammatory bowel disease is the name of a group of disorders that cause the intestines to become inflamed (red and swollen). The inflammation lasts a long time and usually comes back over and over again. More than 600,000 Americans have some kind of inflammatory bowel disease every year.

If you have inflammatory bowel disease, you may have abdominal cramps and pain, diarrhea, weight loss and bleeding from your intestines. Two kinds of inflammatory bowel disease are Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Crohn's disease usually causes ulcers (open sores) along the length of the small and large intestines. Crohn's disease either spares the rectum, or causes inflammation or infection with drainage around the rectum. Ulcerative colitis usually causes ulcers in the lower part of the large intestine, often starting at the rectum.

What causes inflammatory bowel disease?

The exact causes are unknown. The disease may be caused by a germ or by an immune system problem. You don't have to worry about your family members catching the disease from you, because it isn't contagious. However, inflammatory bowel disease does seem to be hereditary (runs in your family).

How is inflammatory bowel disease diagnosed and treated?

Based on your symptoms, your doctor may suspect that you have Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. Your bowel movements may be tested for germs and the presence of blood. Your doctor will probably look inside your intestines with a sigmoidoscope or a colonoscope. In these procedures, the doctor uses a narrow flexible tube to look directly inside your intestines. Special x-rays may be helpful in diagnosing this illness.

The best thing you can do is take good care of yourself. It's important to eat a healthy diet. Depending on your symptoms, your doctor may ask you to cut down on the amount of fiber or dairy products in your diet. In addition to eating well, you need to get enough rest. It's also important that you learn to manage the stress in your life. When you become overly upset by things that happen at home or at work, your intestinal problems can get worse.

You will most likely be treated by a team of doctors. This team may include your family physician, a gastroenterologist (a specialist in stomach and intestinal disorders) and, possibly, a surgeon.

The goal of treatment is to get rid of the inflammation. Many types of medicine can reduce inflammation, including anti-inflammatory drugs, such as sulfasalazine (brand name: Azulfidine), corticosteroids, such as prednisone, and immune system suppressors such as azathioprine (brand name: Imuran) and mercaptopurine (brand name: Purinethol). An antibiotic, such as metronidazole (brand name: Flagyl), may also be helpful for killing germs in the intestines, especially if you have Crohn's disease.

To help treat your symptoms, your doctor may recommend anti-diarrheals, laxatives, pain relievers or other over-the-counter (OTC) drugs. It is important to talk to your doctor before taking any OTC medicine on your own. Your body may not be able to handle the effects of medicine. If you have severe symptoms, such as diarrhea, fever or vomiting, you may need to go to the hospital to be treated with special fluids and medicines that must be given intravenously (in your veins).

If your ulcerative colitis becomes so severe that it can't be helped by medicines, it may be necessary to remove part or all of your colon surgically. Crohn's disease usually isn't helped with surgery.

Because Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis keep coming back and their symptoms cannot be predicted ahead of time, patients with these illnesses can become depressed. If you feel depressed, talk with your family doctor. An antidepressant medicine could help you feel better.

Additional Resources:

American Academy of Family Physicians	www.aafp.org
Mayo Clinic	www.mayoclinic.com
Crohn's & Colitis Foundation of America	www.ccfa.com

For More Information:

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