

Diverticulitis

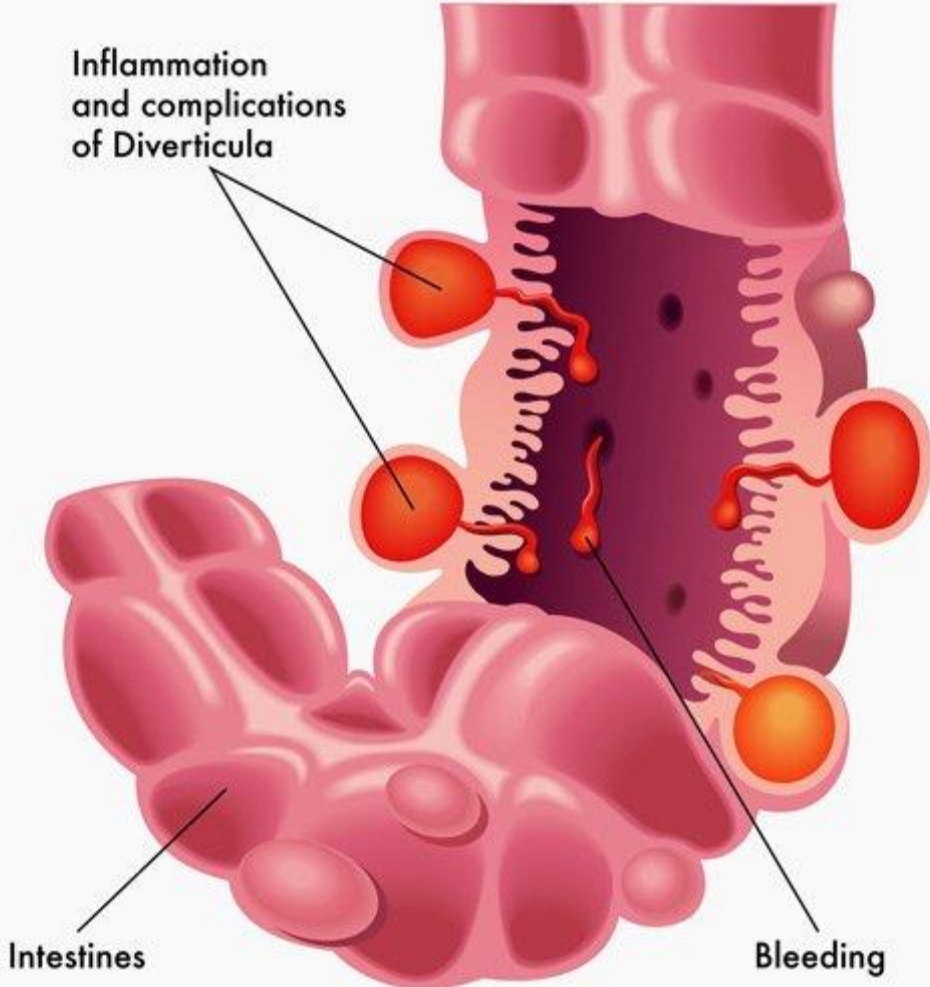
A brief look

What Is Diverticulitis?

- Diverticulitis is the infection or inflammation of pouches that can form in your intestines. These pouches are called diverticula.
- The pouches generally aren't harmful. They can show up anywhere in your intestines. If you have them, it's called diverticulosis. If they become infected or inflamed, you have diverticulitis.
- Sometimes, diverticulitis is minor. But it can also be severe, with a massive infection or perforation (your doctor will call it a rupture) of the bowel.

Diverticulitis

Inflammation and complications of Diverticula



Intestines

Bleeding

What Are the Symptoms of Diverticulitis?

Diverticulitis can be acute or chronic. With the acute form, you may have one or more severe attacks of infection and inflammation. In chronic diverticulitis, inflammation and infection may go down but never clear up completely. Over time, the inflammation can lead to a bowel obstruction, which may cause constipation, thin stools, diarrhea, bloating, and belly pain. If the obstruction continues, abdominal pain and tenderness will increase, and you may feel sick to your stomach or throw up.

You can have the pouches and not know it. The diverticula are usually painless and cause few symptoms, if any. But you might notice:

- Cramping on the left side of your abdomen that goes away after you pass gas or have a bowel movement
- Bright red blood in your poop
- Diverticulitis symptoms are more noticeable and include severe abdominal pain and fever.
- Severe abdominal pain and cramping that is usually worse on the left side and increases when the area is touched
- Nausea
- Chills or fever
- Bloating
- Constipation, thin stools, or diarrhea
- Rectal bleeding (rare)

Call Your Doctor About Diverticulitis If:

- You have a fever, chills, abdominal swelling, or are vomiting.
- You have blood in your stool.
- You have severe or persistent pain.
- Your abdomen becomes rigid and you experience pain when you move; you could have peritonitis, an infection of the membrane that lines the abdominal cavity. Get medical help immediately.

If you continue to have severe pain, despite treatment, you may need further evaluation. Call your doctor.

Causes of Diverticulitis

The pouches on your intestines get inflamed or infected when they tear or become blocked by poop. Your chances of getting diverticulitis rise with age. It's more common in people over 40. Other risk factors include:

- Being overweight
- Smoking cigarettes
- Not getting enough exercise
- Eating lots of fat and red meat but not much fiber
- Taking certain kinds of drugs, including steroids, opioids, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories like ibuprofen or naproxen

Complications of Diverticulitis

If you don't treat it, diverticulitis can lead to serious complications that require surgery:

- **Abscesses**, collections of pus from the infection, may form around the infected diverticula. If these go through the intestinal wall, you could get peritonitis. This infection can be fatal. You'll need treatment right away.
 - **Perforation or tearing** in the intestinal wall can lead to abscesses and infection because of waste leaking into the abdominal cavity.
 - **Scarring** can lead to a stricture or blockage of the intestine.
 - **Fistulas** can develop if an infected diverticulum reaches a nearby organ and forms a connection. This most often happens between the large intestine and the bladder. It can lead to a kidney infection. Fistulas can also form between the large intestine and either the skin or the vagina.
- If you have severe bleeding, you may need a blood transfusion.

Diverticulitis Diagnosis

The symptoms of diverticulitis can also look like other problems. Your doctor will narrow things down by ruling out other issues. They'll start with a physical exam. Women may get a pelvic exam, too. Your doctor may then order one or more tests, including:

- Blood, urine, and stool tests to look for infection
- CT scans to look for inflamed or infected diverticula
- A liver enzyme test to rule out liver problems

Diverticulitis Treatment

If your diverticulitis is mild, your doctor will suggest rest and a liquid diet while your intestines heal. They might also give you antibiotics to treat the infection.

In more severe cases, you might need to stay in the hospital and take antibiotics that are intravenous (injected into your veins). If you have an abdominal abscess, your doctor will drain it. If your intestine is ruptured or you have peritonitis, you'll need surgery.

When you're healed, your doctor might give you a colonoscopy to rule out colon cancer.

Diverticulitis Diet

Sometimes, especially as they get older, people can develop little bulging pouches in the lining of the large intestine. These are called diverticula, and the condition is known as diverticulosis.

When the pouches become inflamed or infected, it leads to a sometimes very painful condition called diverticulitis. In addition to having abdominal pain, people with diverticulitis may experience nausea, vomiting, bloating, fever, constipation, or diarrhea.

Many experts believe that a low-fiber diet can lead to diverticulosis and diverticulitis. This may be why people in Asia and Africa, where the diet tends to be higher in fiber, have a very low incidence of the condition.

Diverticulosis usually causes no or few symptoms; leaving many people unaware that they even have diverticula present. Diverticulitis may need to be treated with antibiotics or, in severe cases, surgery.

Diverticulitis Diet cont

If you're experiencing severe symptoms from diverticulitis, your doctor may recommend a liquid diverticulitis diet as part of your treatment, which can include:

- Water
- Fruit juices
- Broth
- Ice pops

Gradually you can ease back into a regular diet. Your doctor may advise you to start with low-fiber foods (white bread, meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products) before introducing high-fiber foods.

Fiber softens and adds bulk to stools, helping them pass more easily through the colon. It also reduces pressure in the digestive tract.

Many studies show that eating fiber-rich foods can help control diverticular symptoms. Women younger than 51 should aim for 25 grams of fiber daily. Men younger than 51 should aim for 38 grams of fiber daily. Women 51 and older should get 21 grams daily. Men 51 and older should get 30 grams daily.

Diverticulitis Diet cont

Here are a few fiber-rich foods to include in meals:

- Whole-grain breads, pastas, and cereals
- Beans (kidney beans and black beans, for example)
- Fresh fruits (apples, pears, prunes)
- Vegetables (squash, potatoes, peas, spinach)

If you're having difficulty structuring a diet on your own, consult your doctor or a dietitian. They can set up a meal plan that works for you.

Your doctor may also recommend a fiber supplement, such as psyllium (Metamucil) or methylcellulose (Citrucel) one to three times a day. Drinking enough water and other fluids throughout the day will also help prevent constipation.

Understanding Diverticulitis -- Prevention

The best way to prevent diverticulitis is to modify your diet and lifestyle.

Here are some tips:

- **Eat more fiber** by adding whole-grain breads, oatmeal, bran cereals, fibrous fresh fruits, and vegetables to your diet. However, take care to add fiber gradually. A sudden switch to a high-fiber diet can cause [bloating](#) and gas.
- **Bulk up your diet** by adding an over-the-counter preparation containing [psyllium](#), derived from the plant *Plantago psyllium*. You can also try ground psyllium seed: Once a day, add 1 teaspoon ground psyllium seed over any cold liquid and drink within a few minutes of preparing, before the mixture gels.
- **Drink plenty of fluids** (at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day) if you increase your intake of fiber.

Understanding Diverticulitis -- Prevention

Here are some tips:

- **Avoid refined foods**, such as white flour, white rice, and other processed foods.
- **Prevent constipation** by trying over-the-counter stool softeners. However, don't use suppositories or laxatives for constipation on a long-term basis without consulting your doctor. Prunes, prune juice, and psyllium seed are all good natural laxatives. Specially formulated teas to fight constipation are available in health food stores, but some may be very strong, so use them only as directed. Avoid products containing senna (*Cassia senna*), which is an especially strong herbal laxative and can be habit forming. Also, senna can cause staining of the lining of the colon, which may result in a condition called melanosis coli. Polyethylene glycol (MiraLax) is a useful laxative for short-term use in constipation. Prescription drugs, such as Amitiza, are available for long-term constipation. Talk to your doctor about these medications.
- **Exercise regularly**. Exercise can help the muscles in your intestine retain their tone, which encourages regular bowel movements. If you have the urge to move your bowels, don't delay or ignore it.