University Hospitals Dorset
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Diverticular disease

Endoscopy Department Information for patients and carers

What is diverticular disease?

Diverticular disease is a condition in which small pouches (diverticula) develop in the lining of the bowel. Diverticula can occur in the small bowel, but are more common in the large bowel (colon).

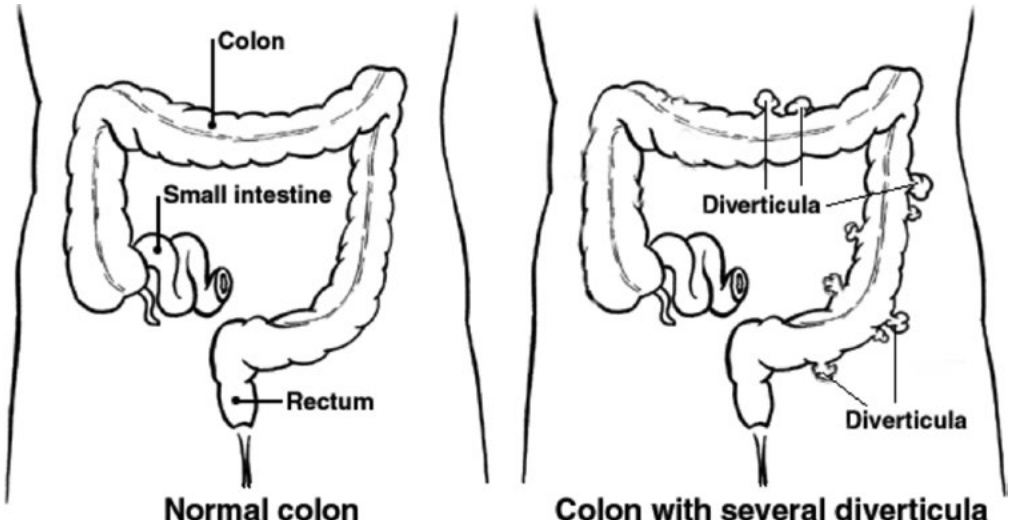


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The colon is a long tube through which waste passes in the form of stool (poo). Liquid stool enters the right side of the colon from the small bowel (intestine). As it moves through the colon, pushed along by the action of layers of muscle lining the bowel wall, water is absorbed and the stool becomes firmer. Ideally, by the time it reaches the rectum, it is soft, formed and easy to pass.

What causes diverticular disease?

For many years, a popular theory has been that a low fibre diet, typical in the West, causes diverticula to form, by leading to smaller, constipated stools which are harder to pass. The ageing process is thought to play a part, leading to weakening of the bowel wall, resulting in pouches forming. Recent studies focus on the role of inflammation and bacteria. The cause remains unclear; more information is needed and research is ongoing.

How common is diverticular disease?

Diverticular disease is a common problem in the Western world. It is rare in younger people, increasing with age. By the time we are 70, about 60% of us will have at least one diverticula. It is equally common in men and women.

How is diverticular disease diagnosed?

Diverticula may be visible on x-rays or scans of the abdomen, such as barium enema or CT imaging. In most cases, diverticular disease is diagnosed during endoscopic procedures such as colonoscopy, or flexible sigmoidoscopy, in which a smooth, flexible camera is passed around the colon. The advantage of these endoscopic investigations is that they allow close, visual inspection of the lining of the bowel, during which samples (biopsies) can be taken, and other causes for symptoms can be identified or ruled out.

Does diverticular disease cause any symptoms?

Many people who are found to have diverticula during endoscopy are completely unaware of them and are not troubled by any obvious symptoms. For others, the diagnosis may explain some of the symptoms that led to them being referred.

Diverticulosis is the term used to describe the uncomplicated presence of these pouches. Many people have one or more diverticula and experience no symptoms at all.

Diverticulitis is the term used when the pouches become irritated or inflamed, causing acute symptoms such as pain, particularly in the left lower abdomen and occasionally bleeding ('acute' means problems that are severe and develop quickly). Inflammation can occur when stool gets stuck in the pouches. It may be accompanied by fever if the pouches become infected, and by a feeling of being generally unwell.

Diverticular disease is the term given to the chronic (long-term), troublesome symptoms which may accompany the presence of diverticula. These can include discomfort or pain in the abdomen (particularly the lower left side), and changes in your normal bowel habit. The symptoms of diverticular disease, while not severe, can make you feel tired and low, and affect your enjoyment of life. Coping with changes in your bowel habit can be challenging; having bouts of diarrhoea may prevent you from getting out and about, whereas constipation can be uncomfortable, and may reduce your appetite.

Does diverticulitis cause any complications?

Diverticulitis can resolve without any treatment, however, if you develop sudden, severe pain in the lower abdomen, which may be accompanied by fever, you should seek urgent medical advice. Antibiotics may be prescribed to help manage diverticulitis if infection is suspected. Resting the bowel by taking fluids only may be advised. In a very small number of cases the diverticula can perforate (burst) leading to widespread infection in the abdomen (peritonitis). This can be life-threatening and may require surgery to repair.

Severe complications of this kind are extremely rare. Recurrent (repeated) episodes of diverticulitis may lead to scarring or thickening of the bowel wall, which can cause a narrowing or 'stricture' of the colon. Surgery may be considered if episodes are repeated, to remove affected sections of the bowel.

How is diverticular disease treated?

If you have diverticulosis without any symptoms you will not need any specific treatment. Taking plenty of fibre and fluid in your diet may help to improve your symptoms if you have diverticular disease. This helps to keep your stool soft, bulky, and easy to pass. You can increase your fibre intake by eating more fruit and vegetables, and choosing whole foods such as brown or wholemeal bread and cereal, wholewheat pasta and brown rice. This can make you feel bloated and uncomfortable at first, and may take time to get used to as these foods are harder to digest. Medication such as Fybogel (ispaghula husk) can also be helpful.

Where can I find further information?

Visit GUTS UK website: **www.gutschariy.org.uk**

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