

Care Gram

Ulcerative Colitis

What Is Ulcerative Colitis?

Ulcerative colitis is a disease of the large bowel characterized by chronic inflammation. The large bowel (colon) is the 4 to 5 foot segment of intestine that begins in the right lower abdomen, extends upward and crosses to the left side, and downward to the rectum. It dries out the liquid stool that enters it and stores it until a bowel movement occurs. Ulcerative colitis affects the colon lining causing redness, swelling, and sores. The disease may involve the entire colon, the rectum, or an area between.

What Causes Ulcerative Colitis?

The exact cause of ulcerative colitis is unknown. Some experts believe that a defect in the immune system may injure the colon. This may occur when your immune system is fighting an infection and this defect causes the immune system also to attack the cells in your colon. It also is more common to have ulcerative colitis if you have other family members with the disease.

What Are the Symptoms?

You may have a crampy stomach pain and diarrhea that is sometimes bloody. In the worst cases, the diarrhea is frequent and severe. Loss of appetite and weight loss also may occur. You may become weak and very sick. When the disease is mostly in the rectum, you may feel strong urges for a bowel movement, but only pass small amounts of bloody stool. The symptoms tend to come and go. There may be long periods without; however, the symptoms typically return.

How Will I Know If I Have Ulcerative Colitis?

If you have symptoms, your doctor will perform certain blood and stool tests to rule out an infection that may mimic the disease. Your doctor also will use the following exams to confirm the presence of disease:

- Sigmoidoscopy – a visual exam of the lining of the rectum and lower colon (sigmoidoscopy)
- Colonoscopy – a visual exam of the entire colon
- Biopsy – small painless tissue samples taken during sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy
- Barium enema X-ray – an X-ray exam that can detect changes in the colon



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What Is the Treatment?

Treatment options include:

- **Cortisone, Steroids, Prednisone:** These powerful drugs usually provide excellent results. A high dose is used first to bring the disease under control. Then the drug is slowly lowered to a new dose every other day. In time, the doctor will try to stop the use of these drugs because of the risk for long-term side effects. These drugs can be intravenous (IV), pills, or small enemas.
- **Immune System Suppressors:** An overactive immune system is a key factor in the cause of ulcerative colitis. Certain drugs can be offered to suppress the immune system.
- **Diet:** There are no foods known to injure the bowel. You are advised to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet with enough protein and calories. A multiple vitamin is often suggested. Iron may be prescribed if a low blood count is present.
- **Stress and anxiety:** These may worsen symptoms of the disease, but are not believed to cause it.
- **Surgery:** Surgery is a welcome option for patients with long-standing disease that is hard to control with medicine. The colon is removed and a pouch is created from the small intestine.

If you have any symptoms of ulcerative colitis, talk with your doctor. New treatment options may improve the quality of your life.