

Patient information factsheet

Diverticular disease and diverticulitis

This factsheet explains what diverticular disease and diverticulitis are, what the symptoms are and how they can be treated.

What are diverticular disease and diverticulitis?

Diverticular disease and diverticulitis are digestive conditions that affect the large intestine (colon), causing tummy (abdominal) pain and other symptoms.

Diverticular disease is when small bulges or pockets, known as 'diverticula', develop in the lining of the intestine.

Diverticulitis is when bacteria gets trapped inside one of the pockets in the lining of the intestine (diverticula), causing the diverticula to become inflamed or infected. This can then trigger more severe symptoms.

What causes diverticula to form?

Ageing

Diverticula are very common and are associated with ageing. It's estimated that 50% of people have diverticula by the time they are 50 years old, and 70% of people have them by the time they are 80 years old.

The majority of people with diverticula will not have any symptoms (medically known as 'diverticulosis'). However, one in four people with diverticula will experience symptoms such as abdominal pain and diarrhoea. People who experience symptoms are said to have diverticular disease.

Lack of fibre in your diet

Not eating enough fibre is thought to be a main cause of diverticula. Fibre makes your stools (poo) softer and larger so that less pressure is needed by your colon to push them out of your body. Eating low-fibre food produces small, hard stools. These stools are more difficult for the muscles of your colon to move, and will cause you to strain. The pressure of moving the hard, small pieces of stools through your colon creates weak spots in the outside layer of muscle. This allows the inner layer to squeeze through these weak spots, creating the diverticula.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom of diverticular disease is intermittent (stop-start) pain in your lower abdomen (tummy). The pain is often worse when you are eating, or shortly afterwards. Passing stools and breaking wind (flatulence) may help to relieve the pain.

Other symptoms of diverticular disease include:

- a change in your normal bowel habit, such as constipation or diarrhoea
- bloating
- bleeding from your rectum (back passage)

If you are worried about your symptoms, contact your general practitioner (GP) for advice.

If your intestine becomes infected or inflamed (diverticulitis), you may also have symptoms such as:

- severe, constant tummy pain
- a high temperature (38°C or above)
- bleeding or passing slime (mucus) from your bottom

If you experience any of these symptoms, contact your GP or call NHS **111** for advice as you may need treatment in hospital.

What treatments are available?

Diverticular disease

Most cases of diverticular disease can be treated at home in a variety of ways:

- **Taking paracetamol to help relieve any pain.** Always read the label or instructions before taking any medication.
- **Eating a high-fibre diet.** This may initially help to control and resolve the symptoms. Some people will notice an improvement after a few days, although it can take around a month for you to fully feel the benefits. For more information about this, please see the 'What can I do to help myself?' section on page 3.
- **Taking bulk-forming laxatives if you are having symptoms of constipation.** Please be aware that these can cause flatulence (wind) and bloating so you should drink plenty of fluid in order to prevent any blockage (obstruction) in your digestive system.

Diverticulitis

Mild cases of diverticulitis can be managed at home with advice from your GP. However, if you have an infection in your diverticula, your GP may prescribe you antibiotics.

Rarely, diverticulitis can lead to serious complications such as:

- a build-up of pus (abscess) in your bowel
- a blockage in your bowel
- an opening from your bowel to another organ, such as your bladder, called a fistula
- a hole (perforation) in your bowel, which can cause a severe infection called peritonitis

If these problems cannot be treated with antibiotics, you may need to have surgery. Your GP will discuss this with you and make any necessary referrals.

When to seek urgent medical attention

Call **999** or go to your nearest emergency department if you:

- have severe tummy pain and are either vomiting, have a swollen tummy, or cannot poo or fart
- are bleeding heavily from your bottom
- are feeling confused, have pale or blotchy skin, have a very high or low temperature, or are breathless or breathing rapidly

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What can I do to help myself?

Try to follow a healthy, balanced diet and make sure you are eating enough fibre. We've included some tips below to help you achieve this.

Advice on eating a balanced diet

- Aim to fill half your plate with vegetables and/or fruits.
- Aim to fill one quarter of your plate with protein foods (for example, lentils, beans, peas, tofu, fish, poultry, lean meat, nuts, seeds and dairy).
- Aim to fill one quarter of your plate with starchy foods (for example, wholemeal bread, pasta, potatoes and breakfast cereals). These foods are filling without providing too many calories. They are also a good source of fibre, vitamins and minerals, as are fruit and vegetables.
- Try to choose higher fibre or wholegrain varieties where possible (for example, wholegrain bread, noodles, brown rice, oats and wholegrain cereals).
- Make sure you add higher fibre foods slowly and a little at a time into your diet. Adding too much fibre all at once can cause gas and cramping.
- You can eat nuts, corn, popcorn and foods with seeds (for example, blueberries, strawberries and tomatoes). Evidence suggests that avoiding these foods is not necessary and does not help reduce symptoms.
- Try to choose high fibre foods, such as lentils, beans and peas more often.
- Try to limit the amount of red meat (for example, beef, pork and lamb) you eat. Some evidence suggests that eating large amounts of red meat may increase your risk of diverticular disease.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1.5 to 2 litres) of fluid each day. Make water your drink of choice. Fibre draws water into your stools to keep them soft and easy to pass.

In addition to eating a balanced diet, you should also exercise regularly. This will help to reduce your risk of diverticular disease.

Further information

Please ask the nursing staff if you have any questions about your treatment or services within the endoscopy unit.

Useful links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/diverticular-disease-and-diverticulitis

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