

PATIENT EDUCATION

Understanding Crohn's Disease

Design edition of the original APS presentation. Educational wording retained; this is not a new clinical review.

A comprehensive guide to symptoms, diagnosis, treatment, and living with this chronic inflammatory condition

What is Crohn's Disease?

Crohn's disease is an autoimmune disease that causes chronic inflammation of the digestive or gastrointestinal (GI) tract. It causes the body's immune system to recognize the lining of the GI tract as something foreign to the body and mount an immune response against it.

Crohn's disease can affect any part of the GI tract from the mouth to the anus but it most often affects the end of the small intestine (ileum) and the beginning of the colon. The exact cause of Crohn's disease is unknown but genetics and a malfunctioning immune system likely play a role in getting it.

Typically, the disease affects people between the ages of 15 and 35 but it can occur at any age. Crohn's disease is an inflammatory bowel disease, like ulcerative colitis. But these diseases are not the same and should not be confused with each other.

Symptoms of Crohn's Disease

The symptoms you experience depends on which part of the GI tract is involved, which is why people with Crohn's disease can have different symptoms.

Primary Symptoms

- Abdominal pain and cramps
- Persistent diarrhea
- Urgent need to move bowels
- Fatigue or low energy
- Weight loss
- Fever

Additional Symptoms

- Mouth sores
- Skin problems
- Eye inflammation
- Anal problems (fissures or fistulas)

How is Crohn's Disease Diagnosed?

There is currently no single test that can be used to diagnose Crohn's disease, so you are likely to have a number of different types of tests. If you think you may have Crohn's disease you should see your primary care doctor as soon as possible.

Initial Assessment

Your doctor will start by asking questions about your symptoms, taking a medical history, and performing a physical exam.

Laboratory Tests

You may have laboratory tests on your blood and stool, as well as x-rays of the upper and lower GI tract.

Advanced Imaging

A CT scan or MRI are other imaging tests that may be done to get detailed images of your digestive tract.

Endoscopic Procedures

Your doctor may recommend an upper endoscopy or colonoscopy to visually inspect the GI tract and biopsy abnormal areas.

Tissue Analysis

Any tissue biopsy will be sent to a pathologist and viewed under a microscope to help confirm the diagnosis.

Treatment Options

There is currently no cure for Crohn's disease, so treatment is aimed at reducing flares and helping people live healthy lives. Treatment is usually multifaceted and often combines medications with diet and nutrition changes.

Medications

Medications suppress the immune system and prevent the body from attacking itself. Some are designed to stop disease flares for short periods, while others prevent flares for longer time periods. It's not uncommon to need multiple medications to control symptoms.

Diet & Nutrition

Some people find that eating certain foods can lead to disease flare ups, so it's reasonable to avoid these foods. Dietitians can help give healthy diet recommendations tailored to your needs.

Surgery

Surgery is used to treat severe symptoms not improved by medicines or lifestyle changes. Surgeries remove affected parts of the colon or open blocked bowel areas. While often needed, surgery won't cure Crohn's disease.

Lifestyle Recommendations

- Get regular exercise
- Avoid smoking
- Avoid nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (ibuprofen, naproxen)
- Work with healthcare providers to find the right treatment combination

Living with Crohn's Disease: Prognosis

Crohn's is a chronic life-long disease that typically follows a pattern of disease flare ups followed by periods of remission. Because of this, lifelong treatment and monitoring is needed.

Important: Having Crohn's disease increases your risk of getting colon cancer. This risk depends on how long you have had the disease and how much of your colon is affected. Your doctor will likely recommend colon cancer screening earlier and more often than what is recommended for people without Crohn's disease.

Additional Resources

For more comprehensive information about Crohn's disease, these organizations provide valuable resources:

Crohn's and Colitis Foundation

<http://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/>

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/healthinformation/digestivediseases/crohns-disease>

American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons

<https://www.fascrs.org/patients/disease-condition/crohns-diseaseexpanded-version>

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