



Diverticulosis

What is diverticulosis?

Diverticulosis is the presence of weak areas or pouches in the wall of the large intestine. The pouches are usually in the part of the intestine called the colon. The pouches, called diverticula, look somewhat like small thumbs poking out of the side of the colon.

Diverticulosis is a common condition. More than half of all elderly people in the United States have it.

How does it occur?

Diverticula seem to occur when the pressure inside the colon is too high. There are several ways this pressure may become high.

The main cause of high pressure appears to be too little fiber in the diet. Fiber helps keep digested food bulky and soft as it passes through the colon. This makes it easier for the food to move through the intestine without too much pressure.

Sometimes the muscles of the large intestine do not work correctly. As digested food moves through the colon, muscle spasms may occur in the colon, causing increased pressure. People who have irritable bowel syndrome (also called spastic colon) appear to have a higher risk of developing diverticulosis because of problems with muscle spasms.

What are the symptoms?

Many people who have diverticulosis do not have any symptoms. If they do have symptoms, abdominal pain is the most common one. The pain is usually in the lower left abdomen. You may feel the pain most of the time, or it may come and go. You may also have more bowel gas or constipation.



RSim General & Colorectal Surgery
1 Farrer Park Station Road,
#13-10, Farrer Park Medical Centre,
Singapore 217562.
Tel: (65) 6636 3493 Fax: (65)6636 3494

Diverticulosis can also cause painless bleeding from the rectum. Bleeding is less common than other symptoms.

When inflammation or infection occurs in or around the pouches, it is called diverticulitis. If you have fever as well as abdominal pain, you may have developed diverticulitis.

How is it diagnosed?

Diverticula are best seen with a test called a *barium enema x-ray*. (In fact, diverticulosis may be discovered when you have this test for some other medical problem.) A barium enema x-ray is a special intestinal x-ray. Barium is put into your rectum and colon. The barium then shows the outline of the large intestine on the x-ray.

Flexible sigmoidoscopy is another procedure that can find diverticula. The doctor inserts a scope, which is a flexible tube and light, into your rectum. The doctor can then look inside your large intestine.

How is it treated?

Most importantly, you need to have more fiber in your diet. You can do this by eating more whole-grain products, such as whole-wheat and bran breads, cereals, and muffins. Also eat more fruits and vegetables. In addition, high-fiber dietary supplements may be helpful.

Avoid eating foods that may get stuck in diverticula, such as popcorn, raisins, whole-kernel corn, and peanuts. If muscle spasms in the colon are a problem, your health care provider may prescribe medication to stop the spasms.

If you have diverticulosis, you should always watch for symptoms of diverticulitis. Tell your health care provider if you have fever and abdominal pain.



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How long will the effects last?

The pouches in the wall of the colon are permanent. Symptoms caused by these pouches may come and go. When you do have symptoms, they may last a few days or longer. Often symptoms can be prevented by having a healthy diet and enough physical activity.

How can I avoid developing diverticulosis?

The best way to try to avoid diverticulosis is to do the things that help you have bowel movements that are soft and easy to pass:

- Eat a healthy diet with lots of fiber.
- Drink a lot of fluids.
- Get enough regular exercise.

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