

Diverticulitis - Why Do So Many People Suffer From It?

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Diverticulitis – we’ve all heard of it. Maybe you even suffer from it. But what is diverticulitis anyway?

Diverticulitis is a condition where diverticula (small pouches that bulge outward through weak spots) in the colon becomes infected, inflamed and/or ruptures.

Diverticula can occur throughout the colon but are most common near the end of the left colon called the sigmoid colon, and once formed they become permanent.

Although rarely seen in areas like Africa and Asia, diverticulitis will affect more than 50% of the American population by age sixty.

The most common sign and symptom of diverticulitis is tenderness around the lower left abdomen resulting in abdominal pain.

If infection is present, any of the following symptoms may also be present:

- Fever
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Chills
- Cramping
- Constipation

How severe these symptoms are depends on how great the infection is and if there are any other complications clouding the issue.

But what is the cause of diverticulitis?

The most popular theory is that a low-fiber diet causes diverticulitis. This emerged from Dr. Denis Burkitt’s studies in Africa in the 1970s. He found that many of the diseases common in the US and England were not present in African natives with their high-fiber vegetable diets. In addition, certain diseases were first noticed in the US in the early 1900s - following the new milling technique that was discovered in 1890 that removed fiber from whole grain flour to produce processed white flour.

Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables and grains that our bodies cannot digest. Fiber works by absorbing water and increasing the soft, bulky waste in your colon.

There are two types of fiber, soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber becomes soft and jelly-like in the intestines, while insoluble fiber passes through almost unchanged. Both kinds help to make stools soft and easy to pass.

Fiber also prevents constipation.

Constipation forces your muscles to strain to move stool that’s too hard, and is the main cause of increased pressure in the colon. Excess pressure causes the weak spots in the colon to bulge out and...you now have diverticula!

Doctors are unsure why diverticula become inflamed, perhaps from stool or bacteria getting trapped in the diverticula. But when they do become infected, an attack of diverticulitis can develop fast and with little warning.

Because there is no cure for diverticulitis, treatment tends to focus on relieving the symptoms by:

- clearing up the infection and inflammation with antibiotics
- resting the colon with bed rest and a liquid diet
- prescribing a pain reliever for comfort
- surgery, only as a last resort and in instances of frequent or severe attacks

While diverticulitis can be an extremely uncomfortable condition to live with, a little prevention will go a long way toward eliminating attacks and increasing quality of life.

Some doctors will recommend avoiding all nuts and popcorn, corn kernels and certain bean skins as well as seeds like raspberry, blackberry, sunflower, sesame, pumpkin, etc., because they believe these will block or irritate the diverticula.

There is no scientific evidence that supports avoiding these foods.

The bottom line?

While doctors don't all agree on what to avoid, they do agree that the best way to prevent attacks of diverticulitis is to:

- consume more fiber
- drink plenty of fluids
- exercise regularly

As a nation, we've forgotten the basics of fiber, water, exercise and fresh air. We've instead traded them for fast food, stress and instant gratification. This may very well be why so many of us develop and suffer from diverticulitis.