

Diverticulitis

After the age of 40, it's common for adults to develop little pouches, or sacs, in the large intestine. These pouches are about the size of large peas. The medical term for one of these pouches is "diverticulum"; several pouches are referred to as "diverticula"; and the condition itself is called "diverticulosis." Most people with diverticulosis have no symptoms and aren't even aware that they have these intestinal pouches. It's common for the condition to be discovered accidentally during a routine X-ray or an intestinal examination for an unrelated purpose. Problems occur, however, when the pouches become inflamed or infected. When this happens, the diverticulosis is said to have progressed to diverticulitis. It is not known why certain patients get diverticulosis or diverticulitis, though it has been theorized that low dietary fiber content predisposes people to these conditions.

Symptoms

Symptoms of diverticulitis include cramping pains in the abdomen, especially on the lower left side, but sometimes in the middle or on the right side, as well. Occasionally, a hole can develop in a pouch causing fever or pain. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, constipation, diarrhea, and chills and fevers or other signs of infection. Bleeding can occasionally occur with diverticulosis, sometimes in large quantities; usually when this occurs, however, pain is not present. If you experience any of the symptoms of diverticulitis, call your doctor or other health care professional promptly.

Prevention

You may be able to prevent the pouches from forming by practicing healthy eating habits and regular exercise. This includes eating plenty of high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain cereals and breads; eating at regular times; and drinking 6 to 8 glasses of water a day.

Treatment

If you are found to have diverticulosis but do not exhibit symptoms, your health care professional may recommend Metamucil® or a fiber additive such as bran in hopes of preventing the disease from progressing. You should continue an active lifestyle and a balanced diet as well. Although other dietary measures such as seed and nut avoidance have been suggested in the past, there is no good scientific support for these approaches.

Treatment for diverticulitis usually involves resting the bowel with a liquid diet, taking antibiotics if an infection is present, taking acetaminophen (Tylenol®)-containing pain relievers, or other measures. Non-steroidal pain relievers such as ibuprofen or naproxen should generally be avoided during a diverticulitis attack. Diverticulitis can usually be managed over time by maintaining a healthy diet and appropriate medical treatment. Occasionally, surgery may be needed if the diverticulitis does not respond to treatment or if complications occur. Surgery involves the removal of affected portions of the intestine.

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Use these Kaiser Permanente resources for reliable health information:

- ❖ Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, message boards, health classes, and much more.
- ❖ Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- ❖ Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, or other resources.
- ❖ With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick topics and messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a *Directory* from your Health Center or Department or download a copy at members.kp.org. (Search “Healthphone”.)

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.