

Crohn's Disease

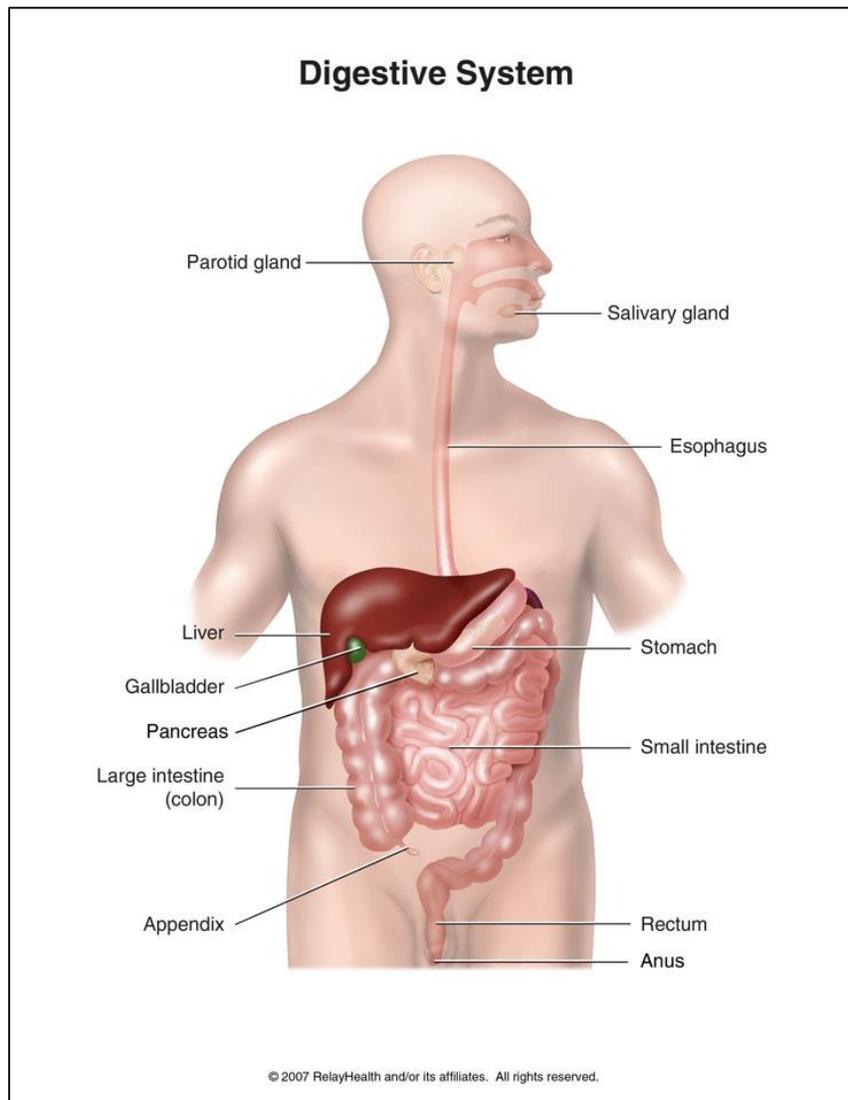
What is Crohn's disease?

Crohn's disease is an inflammation of the intestines (bowel). It can affect the part of the small intestine called the ileum or the large intestine (colon) or both. It is a life-long condition, but your symptoms may come and go and there may be times when you are completely free of symptoms

Crohn's disease is 1 of the 2 illnesses called inflammatory bowel disease. (The other disease is ulcerative colitis.) Crohn's disease may also be called ileitis, enteritis, or regional enteritis.

Crohn's disease causes swelling, redness, and even sores (ulcers) in the intestines. The ulcers can make a hole in the wall of the intestine, which can cause life-threatening infection and bleeding. Both the swelling and scar tissue from the sores can block the passage of food through the intestines.

Crohn's disease is an unpredictable disease. You may go for weeks or months without symptoms or you may have symptoms every day. However, treatment can help control your symptoms and you should be able to keep having a full and active life.



What is the cause?

Doctors don't know what causes this disease, but it does seem to run in families. It appears to be an autoimmune problem, which means that your body's defenses against infection are attacking your own tissue. However, this has not been proven to be the cause of this disease.

The disease is not caused by stress or sensitivity to certain foods. However, these things may trigger symptoms or make them worse.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of Crohn's disease include:

- pain or cramping in your belly, often on the lower right side
- diarrhea
- fever
- tiredness
- weight loss
- tenderness of the rectum
- rectal pain with bowel movements
- rectal bleeding
- mucus in bowel movements

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. The exam will include a rectal exam to look for inflammation and sores and to check for blood in the stool.

Tests you may have are:

- blood tests
- a barium swallow X-ray exam to look at the upper small intestine
- a barium enema X-ray exam to look for inflammation in the lower intestine

You will usually have a colonoscopy. This is a procedure in which your provider uses a thin, flexible tube with a tiny camera to look at the inside of your intestine. During this procedure your provider may do a biopsy, taking a small piece of tissue for lab tests.

You may also have a CT scan of your bowel. This special X-ray exam allows your healthcare provider to see the whole colon, lower small intestine, and the nearby organs rather than just the inner lining seen with a colonoscopy.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for Crohn's disease, but treatment can:

- Lessen or prevent inflammation and pain.
- Help your bowel work normally--for example, help it absorb food properly and prevent blockage.
- Help avoid problems that can be caused by this disease.

The main types of medicines prescribed for Crohn's disease are:

- anti-inflammatory medicine
- antibiotics
- immune system suppressors

Infliximab (Remicade) is an example of one of the newer immune suppressing medicines. It helps keep your immune system from recognizing your bowel as foreign tissue and attacking it.

Some of the medicines prescribed by your provider are taken by mouth. Others are creams or ointments used in the rectal area. Still others are available as enemas to help with lower bowel and rectal symptoms. These medicines need to be monitored through blood tests and exams. Your provider will tell you how often you will need to be tested to make sure that the medicines you are taking are still effective and safe for you.

Researchers are working to find better anti-inflammatories and immune suppressants. If your medicines aren't working well, you can ask your healthcare provider if there are clinical trials of new medicines that you might participate in.

In addition to medicines that help control inflammation and prevent damage to your bowel, you will likely need other medicines from time to time to control your symptoms when your Crohn's disease is active. For example, your healthcare provider may prescribe antidiarrheal medicine. Diarrhea can make it harder to keep doing your normal daily activities. It can also cause dehydration and poor nutrition. When you have a lot of diarrhea, you lose water and do not absorb enough nutrition from food.

You may also need:

- acetaminophen for pain
- vitamins and minerals

In some cases you may need to stay in the hospital. Your treatment may include:

- resting your bowel by not eating
- intravenous (IV) feeding to give you nourishment while you are resting your bowel
- blood transfusions to replace blood you have lost
- IV medicines
- nasogastric suction to remove stomach juices through a tube passed through your nose (this allows the stomach and intestines to rest)

Crohn's disease can cause complications. These problems include blockage of the bowel and infection and sores in the abdomen or rectum. Another possible problem is a fistula. A fistula is an abnormal connection between 2 parts of the bowel or between the bowel and other organs, such as the bladder or vagina. It can cause infection and stool leakage.

You may need one or more surgeries to:

- Stop bleeding.
- Repair fistulas or holes (perforations) in the bowel.
- Remove damaged tissue that has caused a blockage.
- Remove the entire colon and create an opening in the belly to remove wastes from the body (a procedure called a colostomy).

Surgery may give you a period of rest from the disease, but the symptoms will usually come back.

Crohn's disease increases your risk for cancer of the colon or anus. Your healthcare provider will recommend that you have a colonoscopy on a regular schedule to look for cancer so you can catch it at an early stage if it happens.

How can I take care of myself?

It is important to follow your healthcare provider's instructions. Ask your provider when you should call about pain, diarrhea, bleeding, or other serious symptoms.

If you have diarrhea:

- Rest your bowel by not eating solid foods for a few hours. Just drink clear liquids, such as the rehydrating fluids (sports drinks) that you can buy at the store, to rest your bowel.
- As the diarrhea gets better after a few hours, eat small, frequent, soft, bland meals.
- Avoid foods that have a laxative effect, such as raw fruits and concentrated fruit juices.
- Gradually, over a couple of days, return to your usual diet.

If you have cramps or abdominal pain, it may help to put heat on your belly using a covered hot water bottle or a heating pad set on low.

In addition:

- Work out a plan with your healthcare provider for managing your symptoms and carefully follow the plan.
- Keep your all of your appointments, including follow-up visits, and monitoring tests.
- Take your medicines just like your provider tells you to. Tell your provider about any other medicines you are taking.
- Don't smoke. Smoking seems to cause attacks of pain and diarrhea.
- Avoid NSAIDS, such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and naproxen. They can irritate the lining of your intestines and cause flare-ups of symptoms.
- Take action to prevent infection. This means avoiding people who are sick, washing your hands often, and getting the flu and pneumonia vaccines.
- Eat a healthy diet and avoid foods that seem to trigger your symptoms. Ask your healthcare provider if you should increase or decrease the fiber in your diet.
- Don't use a lot of stimulants, such as caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, soft drinks) and nicotine. Avoid milk products if they cause symptoms.
- Stay physically active according to your provider's recommendation.
- Keep a healthy weight.
- Learn relaxation techniques to reduce stress. Talk with a counselor or mental health professional about ways to manage the anxiety, stress, and depression that can be caused by a chronic illness. Find family and friends to help.
- Ask your provider how often you should have a colonoscopy for cancer screening.

For more information contact:

Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America

Phone: 800-932-2423

Web site: <http://www.cdfa.org>

How can I help prevent Crohn's disease?

Doctors don't know how to prevent Crohn's disease.

Developed by RelayHealth.

Adult Advisor 2012.1 published by [RelayHealth](#).

Last modified: 2012-01-20

Last reviewed: 2011-11-02

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

[References](#)

[Adult Advisor 2012.1 Index](#)

© 2012 RelayHealth and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved.