

## Crohn's and colitis

Crohn's disease causes inflammation of the full thickness of the bowel wall and may involve any part of the digestive tract from the mouth to the anus. Ulcerative colitis is inflammation confined to the inner lining of the large bowel (colon and rectum). These diseases are commonly called inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). IBD tends to develop between 15 and 30 years of age but can start at any age. There is a marked increase in the number of children under the age of nine years now developing Crohn's disease. It is estimated more than 61,000 Australians have IBD.

### Physical effects are varied

Everyone is different in their response to the disease. The severity of symptoms will vary from time to time and from person to person.

IBD is not classed as a 'progressive' disease, rather flare ups can range from mild to severe and back to mild again. Some people will experience periods of relief from symptoms in between flare-ups.

There is no way to predict for how long a person will stay free from symptoms, or when the next flare up will occur. Some flare ups will settle down relatively quickly with treatment. On other occasions, it may take months for symptoms to respond to the treatment.

IBD interferes with normal body functions and some of the signs and symptoms can include:

- Pain in the abdomen
- Weight loss
- Diarrhoea (sometimes with blood and mucus)
- Tiredness
- Constipation
- Malnutrition
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Delayed or impaired growth in children

### The cause is unknown

The cause of ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease is unknown. Some scientists believe IBD could be due to a defect in the body's immune system. Others feel that infection by a bacterium or virus may be important. Stress or diet is not thought to be involved in the cause IBD. These diseases are not contagious.

### Various treatment options are possible

There are a variety of tests needed to diagnose IBD. They include: blood tests, faecal (bowel motion) examination, x-rays and colonoscopy and gastroscopy procedures. The type of treatment depends on whether you have ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.

Treatment for Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis may include:

- Drugs to reduce the chances of a relapse once the disease is in remission.
- Steroid (cortisone) medication.
- Drugs to reduce the activity of the immune system.
- Corrective surgery for complications.

### People with IBD may need nutritional supplements

Since the cause is unknown, there is no cure or way to prevent IBD. A person with IBD needs to eat a healthy balanced diet. Nutritional supplements, regular vitamin supplements or vitamin B12 injections might be required. Some people find that certain foods - commonly high fibre, spicy or fatty foods - make their diarrhoea worse and need to be limited.

### **People with IBD can lead a normal life**

People with IBD lead useful and productive lives, even though they need to take medications. When they are not experiencing a flare up of their disease, they feel quite well and are often free of symptoms.

People with IBD can marry, enjoy sexual activity and have children. They can hold down jobs, care for families and enjoy sport and recreational activities. In short, they can lead normal lives.

Even though there is no cure for IBD, current medical therapy has improved the health and quality of life of most people with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. There is good reason to believe that research underway today will lead to further improvements in medical and surgical treatment of IBD and or a cure.

### **Where to get help**

- See your doctor and obtain a referral to a specialist (gastroenterologist).
- Arrange an emergency plan of action with your specialist, including after hours phone numbers.
- Contact the Crohn's & Colitis Australia™ (CCA) for information, advice, support services, and membership information. Tel. (03) 9815 1266 or toll free 1800 138 029.

### **Things to remember**

- Ulcerative colitis is located only in the large bowel (colon and rectum).
- Crohn's disease can appear in any part of the digestive tract from mouth to anus.
- Diet supplements or vitamin injections may be required.
- There is no cure - medical treatment can only help suppress the symptoms.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Crohn's & Colitis Australia

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