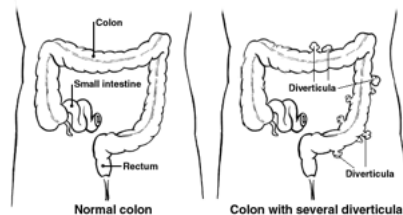




Diverticular Disease

What are diverticulae?

A diverticulum is a small pouch with a narrow neck that protrudes (sticks out from) the wall of the gut. Diverticula means more than one diverticulum. They can develop on any part of the gut (intestines) but usually occur in the colon (sometimes called the large bowel or large intestine). They most commonly develop in the section of the colon leading towards the rectum, where the stools (sometimes called faeces or motions) are becoming more solid (this is on the left side of the abdomen). Several diverticula may develop over time. Some people eventually end up with many diverticula.



Who gets diverticula ?

Diverticula are common. They become more common with increasing age. About 1 in 20 people in their 40s, about 1 in 3 people in their 60s and about half of people in their 80s have diverticular of the colon. Men and women are equally affected.

What causes diverticula ?

The reason why diverticula develop is not clear. It may be hereditary (your parents may have had diverticula). It is also thought to be related to not eating enough fibre. Fibre is part of food that is not digested.

Your gut moves stool (faeces) along the bowel with gentle squeezes of its muscular wall. The stools tend to be drier, smaller, harder and more difficult to move along if you don't eat much fibre or drink enough fluids. Your gut muscles have to work harder if there is little fibre in your gut. High pressures may develop in parts of your gut when it squeezes hard stools. The increased pressure may push the inner lining of a small area of your gut through the muscle wall to form a diverticulum.

Secretary: Mrs Liz Costello.

Tel: 0161 447 6761.

Email: enquiries@mmsecretaries.co.uk

What are the symptoms of diverticula ?

In most cases diverticula causes no harm or symptoms.

In some cases pain in the abdomen and / or bloating may occur. The pain is usually crampy and tends to come and go. You may get relief from the pain and the bloating by going to the toilet to pass stools. Some people develop diarrhoea or constipation. It is not clear how diverticula cause these symptoms. If you get symptoms with diverticula, it is called 'diverticular disease'.

Symptoms of diverticular disease are similar to those that occur with a different condition called irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). However IBS usually affects younger adults and so symptoms that first develop in a younger adult are more likely to be due to IBS. Likewise, symptoms that first develop in older people are more likely to be due to diverticular disease. However, in some cases it is difficult to tell if symptoms are due to diverticular disease or IBS.

What are the possible complications of diverticula ?

Complications are uncommon and include the following:

Diverticulitis (infection)

About 1 in 10 people with diverticula develop a bout of diverticulitis at some stage. This is when one or more of the diverticula become inflamed and infected. This may occur if some faeces gets trapped and stagnates in a diverticulum. Bacteria (germs) in the trapped faeces may then multiply and cause infection. Symptoms of diverticulitis include:

- A constant pain in the abdomen. It is commonly in the lower left side of the abdomen. This is over the site where the diverticula most commonly develop.
- Fever (high temperature)
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- You may feel sick or vomit

An abscess may develop if the infection is severe

Diverticulitis is usually treated with antibiotics and settles within a week or so. Admission to hospital is needed in some cases. Surgery is sometimes needed to drain an abscess or to remove a badly infected part of the colon. Some people have several bouts of diverticulitis in their life.

Bleeding

A diverticulum may occasionally bleed and you may pass blood into your stools. Most of the time, the bleeding is slight but occasionally it is heavy.

Obstruction, fistula and peritonitis.

Infected diverticula occasionally cause a blockage (obstruction) of the colon, or form a channel (fistula) to other organs such as the bladder. A diverticulum may, rarely burst and cause infection

Secretary: Mrs Liz Costello.

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inside the abdomen (peritonitis). Surgery is usually needed to treat these serious but uncommon complications.

What is the treatment for diverticula ?

No treatment is needed in most cases as they commonly cause no symptoms. If diverticula cause symptoms, then one or more of the following may be advised by your doctor.

- Fluid

You should aim to drink 2.5 to 3 litres of clear fluid a day.

- Eat at least 5 portions of fruit and fibre a day

This is good advice for anyone, whether you have diverticula or not. Fibre helps to make larger and softer stools. If you have pain due to diverticula, you may find that the pain is eased if you eat a high fibre diet. Also a high fibre diet may prevent further diverticula forming which may reduce the risk of future complications. It also prevents constipation. Many foods are high in fibre and include the following:

- Fruit, vegetables and nuts

- Wholemeal or wholewheat bread, biscuits and flour (for baking)

- Whole grain breakfast cereals such as Allbran, Weetabix, muesli etc.

- Brown rice, brown pasta

Some experts feel that eating more fibre from fruit and vegetables is probably better than eating more grain based fibre (bread) to ease symptoms due to diverticula.

You may have some bloating and extra wind at first when you start eating more fibre. This is often temporary and tends to settle in a few weeks as your gut becomes used to the extra fibre.

However, a few people report that a high fibre diet makes their symptoms worse. Please see your doctor again if you feel that fibre is making things worse rather than better.

- Fibre supplements

These may be advised if a high fibre diet does not prevent constipation. Several types are available at pharmacies, health food shops and supermarkets or on prescription. The most common (and cheapest) is bran. Some people find bran unpalatable and try other fibre supplements such as ispaghula. A pharmacist will advise.

Some people find that bran based products cause symptoms to become worse for as long as they take them. If your symptoms do not improve after 3-4 weeks of taking bran, then stop taking it. You should then try taking a heaped tablespoon of linseeds daily. These can be sprinkled onto your cereal or salads or mixed into stews / bolognese etc.

- Painkillers

May be needed if you develop abdominal pain

- Antibiotics or surgery

May be needed if you develop a complication such as diverticulitis (described above).

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