

About Ulcerative Colitis

Ulcerative colitis is a disease that causes inflammation and sores, called *ulcers*, in the top layers of the lining of the large intestine. The inflammation usually occurs in the rectum and lower part of the colon, but it may affect the entire colon. Ulcerative colitis rarely affects the small intestine except for the lower section, called the ileum. Ulcerative colitis may also be called *colitis*, *ileitis*, or *proctitis*.

This inflammation makes the colon empty frequently, causing diarrhea. Ulcers form in places where the inflammation has killed colon lining cells; the ulcers bleed and produce pus and mucus.

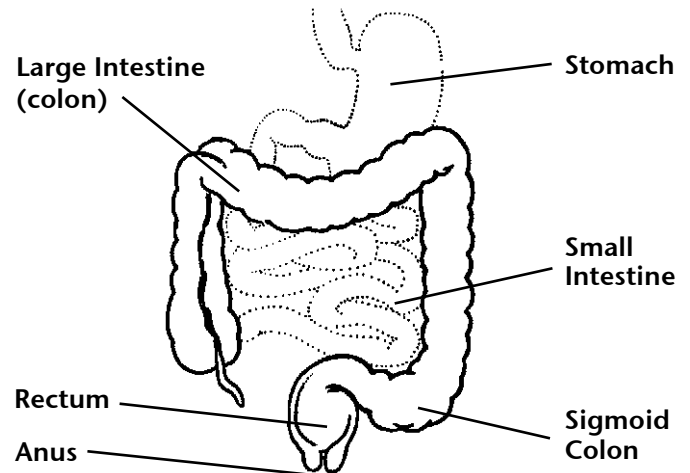
Ulcerative colitis is an inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), the general name for diseases that cause inflammation in the intestines. Ulcerative colitis can be difficult to diagnose because its symptoms are similar to other intestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome and to another type of IBD called Crohn's disease. Crohn's disease usually occurs in the small intestine, but it can also occur in the mouth, esophagus, stomach, duodenum, large intestine, appendix, and anus.

Ulcerative colitis occurs most often in people ages 15 to 40, although children and older people sometimes develop the disease. Ulcerative colitis affects men and women equally and appears to run in some families.

What causes ulcerative colitis?

Theories about what causes ulcerative colitis abound, but none have been proven. The most popular theory is that the body's immune system reacts to a virus or a bacterium by causing ongoing inflammation in the intestinal wall.

People with ulcerative colitis have abnormalities of the immune system, but doctors do not know whether these abnormalities are a cause or a result of the disease. Ulcerative colitis is not caused by



emotional distress or sensitivity to certain foods or food products, but these factors may trigger symptoms in some people.

What are the symptoms of ulcerative colitis?

The most common symptoms of ulcerative colitis are abdominal pain and bloody diarrhea. Patients also may experience:

- Fatigue
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Rectal bleeding
- Loss of body fluids and nutrients

About half of patients have mild symptoms. Others suffer frequent fever, bloody diarrhea, nausea, and severe abdominal cramps. Ulcerative colitis may also cause problems such as arthritis, inflammation of the eye, liver disease (fatty liver, hepatitis, cirrhosis, and primary sclerosing cholangitis), osteoporosis, skin rashes, anemia, and kidney stones. No one knows for sure why problems occur outside the colon. Scientists think these complications may occur when the immune system triggers inflammation in other parts of the body. These problems are usually mild and go away when the colitis is treated.

How is ulcerative colitis diagnosed?

A thorough physical exam and a series of tests may be required to diagnose ulcerative colitis.

Blood tests may be done to check for anemia, which could indicate bleeding in the colon or rectum. Blood tests may also uncover a high white blood cell count, which is a sign of inflammation somewhere in the body. By testing a stool sample, the doctor can tell if there is bleeding or infection in the colon or rectum.

The doctor may do a *colonoscopy*. For this test, the doctor inserts an endoscope – a long, flexible, lighted tube connected to a computer and TV monitor – into the anus to see the inside of the colon and rectum. The doctor will be able to see any inflammation, bleeding, or ulcers on the colon wall. During the exam,, the doctor may do a biopsy, which involves taking a sample of tissue from the lining of the colon to view with a microscope. A barium enema X-ray of the colon may also be required. This procedure involves filling the colon with barium, a chalky white solution. The barium shows up white on X-ray film, allowing the doctor a clear view of the colon, including any ulcers or other abnormalities that might be there.

What is the treatment for ulcerative colitis?

- Each person may have ulcerative colitis differently, so treatment differs for each person. Emotional and psychological support is important for every person who has the disease.
- People whose symptoms are triggered by certain foods (highly seasoned foods, milk, sugar [lactose]) may be able to control the symptoms by avoiding these foods.
- Treatment for ulcerative colitis depends on how serious the disease is. Most people are treated with medication that helps decrease the inflammatory process. If prescribed, you will need to take these medications as told to decrease symptoms and flare ups.
- In severe cases, a patient may need surgery to remove the diseased colon. Surgery is the only cure for ulcerative colitis.

What is the prognosis of ulcerative colitis?

It is difficult to know how each person with ulcerative colitis will react. Some people will have mild symptoms which may go into remission after one attack. Other people may develop more severe symptoms or the colitis may flare up frequently, making it a chronic condition. That is why it is very important for you to follow your doctor's treatment plan.