

Diverticulosis and Diverticulitis

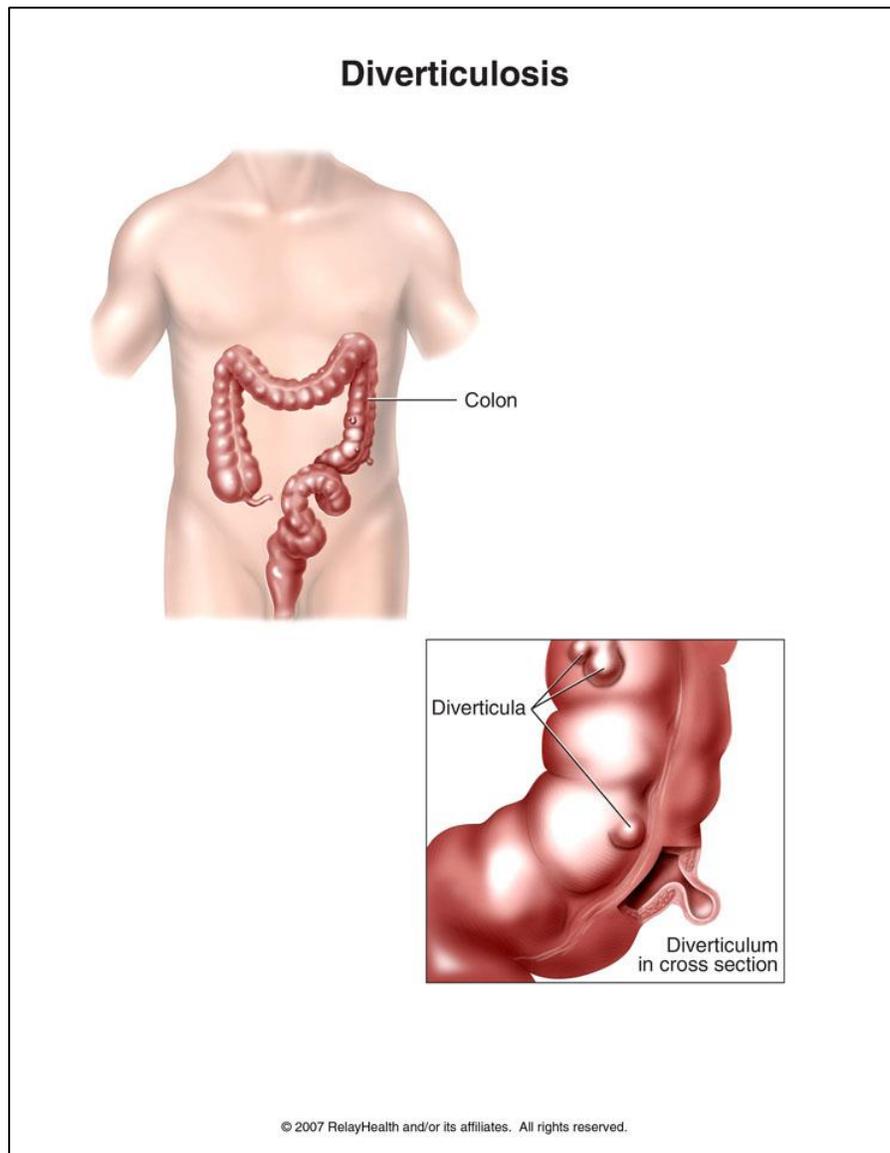
What is diverticulosis?

Diverticulosis is the presence of weak areas or tiny pouches in the wall of the intestine. The pouches are usually in the part of the intestine called the colon. The pouches, called diverticula, look like small thumbs or tiny balloons poking out of the side of the colon.

Diverticulosis is a common condition. About half of the people over age 60 in the US have it.

What is diverticulitis?

Diverticulitis is a problem that can happen if you have diverticula in your intestine. Diverticula are tiny pouches or weak areas that bulge out from the lining of the wall of the intestine. They look like small thumbs poking out of the side of the bowel. When you have diverticula in your intestines, it is called diverticulosis. When these pouches become inflamed, it is called diverticulitis.



How does it occur?

It appears that the main cause of diverticula is too little fiber in the diet. Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that the body cannot digest. Fiber helps make stools soft and easy to pass. It helps prevent constipation. When you have constipation, you strain to pass the stool that is too hard. The high pressure from the straining causes the weak spots in the colon to bulge out and become diverticula.

What are the symptoms?

Usually diverticulosis does not cause any symptoms. When symptoms occur, abdominal pain is the most common one. The pain is usually in the lower left abdomen. You may feel the pain most of the time, or it may come and go. You may also have more gas or constipation.

Diverticulosis can also cause painless bleeding from the rectum. Bleeding is less common than other symptoms.

When inflammation or infection occurs in or around the pouches, it is called diverticulitis. If you have fever as well as abdominal pain, you may have developed diverticulitis. You should see your healthcare provider if this happens.

Symptoms of diverticulitis may include:

- alternating diarrhea and constipation
- severe cramps in your lower left side that come and go
- pain on the lower left side of the abdomen
- chills or fever
- nausea and vomiting
- rectal bleeding.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and examine you. You may have some tests.

Diverticula are best seen with a special intestinal X-ray called a barium enema. In fact, diverticulosis may be discovered when you have this test for some other medical problem. Barium is put into your rectum and colon through a small tube. The barium then shows the outline of the large intestine on the X-ray. The outline of diverticula can also be seen on the X-ray.

Sigmoidoscopy is another procedure that can find diverticula. The doctor inserts a scope into your rectum. The scope is a thin, flexible, lighted tube. The doctor can then look inside your large intestine. Depending on your symptoms, colonoscopy may be done instead to look for diverticula. The colonoscope is a longer tube. It allows your doctor to see more of the intestine than can be seen with the sigmoidoscope.

How is Diverticulosis treated?

Most importantly, you need to have more fiber in your diet. You can do this by eating more whole-grain products, such as whole-wheat and bran breads, cereals, and muffins. Also eat more fruits and vegetables. In addition, high-fiber dietary supplements may be helpful.

There is no evidence that any foods cause diverticulosis, but you may want to avoid eating foods that irritate the diverticula, such as popcorn kernels, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, and nuts. If these foods do not seem to cause you abdominal pain, you may eat them.

If you have diverticulosis, you should always watch for symptoms of diverticulitis. See your healthcare provider right away if you have fever and abdominal pain.

How is Diverticulitis treated?

For an attack of acute diverticulitis, you may need to be hospitalized. Depending on how bad the attack is, your treatment may include antibiotics, intravenous (IV) fluids, and nasogastric suction (a procedure that relieves pressure in the intestine).

If attacks are severe or frequent, you may need surgery. There are 2 types of surgery to correct the problem.

- **Colon resection.** The area of the colon with the infected diverticula is removed and the remaining ends of the colon are sewn back together.
- **Colostomy.** The colostomy is done to bypass the inflamed colon to help it heal. A colostomy attaches part of the healthy colon to an opening in the wall of the abdomen. Bowel movements then pass through this opening instead of the rectum. They are collected in a bag outside the body. After the colon has healed, the colostomy can be reversed. This means that you will have a second surgery to rejoin the ends of the colon to each other and will no longer have a colostomy.

How long will the effects last?

Diverticulitis is usually mild and should respond well to antibiotics and changes in diet.

How can I take care of myself?

- Use a source of heat such as a hot water bottle for cramps.
- If you have diarrhea, drink liquids and avoid solid foods. Try to rest until the diarrhea stops. When your symptoms are gone, eat soft, bland, low-fiber foods at first. Your healthcare provider will let you know when you should gradually begin eating a high-fiber diet.
- Take all the medicine prescribed by your healthcare provider. If you stop taking antibiotics when your symptoms are gone but before the scheduled end of treatment, the symptoms may return.
- If your symptoms worsen, contact your provider.

How can I help prevent recurrence of diverticulitis?

- Follow your healthcare provider's prescribed treatment, including diet recommendations.
- Once you are well, eat regular, nutritious meals containing high-fiber foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods. Many people find fiber supplements, such as Metamucil, Citrucel, or other psyllium products, to be helpful, but in a few cases they make constipation worse.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Watch for changes in your normal bowel pattern. If you are having problems with constipation or diarrhea, make an appointment to see your healthcare provider.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Exercise as recommended by your provider.
- Watch to see if some foods seem to cause abdominal pain. Foods that are more likely to cause pain are popcorn kernels and other foods that may get stuck in diverticula, such as sunflower seeds, sesame

seeds, and nuts. The seeds in tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers, strawberries, and raspberries, as well as poppy seeds, are usually harmless. Keeping a food diary may help you remember what you ate a few hours before getting abdominal pain.

- Contact your healthcare provider if your symptoms come back.

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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](#)

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