

Diverticular Disease

A diverticulum (if there is more than one they are known as diverticulae), is a protrusion of the intestine's inner lining which form pockets that develop in the colon wall. Diverticulosis describes the presence of these pockets. Diverticulitis is an infection of the diverticula and when these pockets become inflamed symptoms can include pain in the abdomen, chills/fever and a change in bowel habit.

Some people are born with a diverticulum/ diverticulae; however most diverticulum/ diverticulae develop during life and become more common with age. About half the people in the UK have diverticulae by the age of 50 and nearly three quarters by the age of 80.

The cause of diverticulae isn't precisely known, but it is believed to be linked to diet. It is thought that eating a diet which lacks fibre over a number of years causes the muscle of the bowel to work harder. This creates an increased pressure inside the colon and results in these little pockets being 'blown out'.

Symptoms of Diverticular Disease

Diverticulae are common. For most people they don't cause any symptoms and no treatment is required.

Some patients can experience pain in the left lower abdomen. This is not usually severe and tends to be crampy in nature.

Diverticulitis occurs when a diverticulum or diverticulae become infected. Pain and tenderness may develop usually in the left lower abdomen. This can be associated with feeling unwell and a fever. It is not uncommon to experience some change in bowel habit.

Sometimes the infection causing diverticulitis can lead to an abscess forming next to the bowel. This may result in more pain and tenderness, a high fever and chills.

Occasionally bleeding can occur from a diverticulum. There can be quite a lot of blood and this tends to be slightly darker in colour. Diverticular disease is a combination of an abnormal muscle and diverticula with one of the symptoms of the disease being significant bleeding from the colon.

Diverticulitis can occasionally lead to severe complications where an inflamed pocket or an abscess ruptures causing peritonitis within the abdomen. This is usually associated with more severe pain affecting the whole of the abdomen, it hurts to move, and the pain is often accompanied by vomiting.

How is Diverticular Disease is Investigated?

Diverticula are frequently found during examinations for other colorectal problems, e.g. changes in bowel habit or bleeding. In this situation no treatment is usually required. A high

fibre diet is usually advised to reduce the risk of complications.
Once formed diverticula will not disappear.

Treatments for Diverticular Disease

Diverticulitis normally requires treatment with antibiotics and in some cases this treatment needs to be in hospital. These attacks normally settle down quite quickly but people often feel some discomfort for several weeks after.

A CT Scan can be helpful in making the diagnosis and assessing the infection. Some patients who have frequent episodes of infection might be advised to have a planned operation to remove the affected part of the bowel. When an abscess develops a CT scan is usually required to make the diagnosis. Usually the abscess can be drained from the outside without an operation and antibiotics are given.

Bleeding from the bowel normally stops on its own. Sometimes a blood transfusion is required. It is very rare for an operation to be needed.

Although rare, if peritonitis develops an emergency operation to remove the affected part of the bowel is usually required.

Surgical procedures that can be performed for diverticular disease can include:

- Sigmoid Colectomy
- Left Hemicolectomy
- Anterior Resection

For More information about these surgical procedures please visit the Treatments section of the Birmingham Bowel Clinic website.

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What are the next steps?

If you think you have this condition or any of these symptoms, you will need to seek medical advice.

If you have private medical care or wish to pay to see a consultant:

Take this factsheet along to your own GP and request a referral to one of our consultants.

For more information or to make an appointment:

Contact the Birmingham Bowel Clinic on 0845 241 7762 or email enquiries@birminghambowelclinic.co.uk.