

Crohn's Disease- Defining and Examining This Increasingly Common Condition

As the average American diet has slowly changed over the last few decades to include increased amounts of processed foods and fast foods and the levels of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains ingested has decreased, doctors have seen digestive conditions increase at an alarming pace. Crohn's disease is one of the many conditions that is seeing a significant increase in the rate of diagnosis. Crohn's is an ongoing condition that is hallmarked by inflammation of one or more areas of the digestive tract. While the lower intestinal tract is most commonly affected, the disease can affect any part of the GI system from the mouth to the anus.

Diagnosing Crohn's disease is surprisingly difficult, largely due to the fact that it shares many symptoms with irritable bowel syndrome and colitis. Colitis affects the large intestine alone, but because Crohn's can also affect this area, the disease is commonly misdiagnosed at first. A genetic predisposition can greatly increase one's likelihood of developing the condition, but it can also occur even in the absence of family members with the disease. The typical age of onset is between the ages of 20 and 30, though it can affect people of any age.

The causes of Crohn's disease are not known, but many people believe that it is an immune system disorder that causes the body to attack foods and bacteria as though they were foreign invaders in the body. This causes the buildup of white blood cells within the GI tract, causing inflammation, cramping, and even ulcers. While the disease is not caused by a poor diet, certain foods can trigger flare ups and can cause the disease to present itself. Because of this, monitoring of the diet is especially important in people who have been diagnosed with the condition.

The symptoms of Crohn's disease are varied depending on the area of the GI tract that is being affected. The most common symptoms are severe abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, skin problems, anemia, and weight loss. The severity of these symptoms varies from patient to patient. In many cases, secondary symptoms such as

hemorrhoids, fistulas, ulcers, and anal fissures can often develop as complications of the primary symptoms. Nutritional deficiencies are also common in Crohn's patients, as are kidney stones and liver or gall bladder problems.

Diagnosis of Crohn's disease can be tricky, and the disease is undetectable during periods of good physical health. During a flare up, doctors can test for anemia as well as check the levels of white blood cells. The condition causes inflammation, which will increase white cell levels. An upper or lower GI series using barium may also be done to look for inflammation and abnormalities, and a colonoscopy can help to show bleeding, inflammation, and more. With a colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy, the tools used for the procedure also enable doctors to easily remove a small tissue sample for biopsy.

Treating Crohn's disease depends largely on symptom management. There is no cure for the condition, so treatment goals are typically aimed at controlling inflammation, relieving cramping and diarrhea, alleviating bleeding, and correcting nutritional deficiencies. Drug therapy is often used to treat inflammation, as well as to suppress the immune system during significant flare-ups. Surgery can help to remove intestinal blockages or even to remove the colon entirely. Crohn's disease requires surgery for a majority of patients over time, but symptoms are likely to present again even after a successful surgery. One of the most important aspects of treatment is certainly to develop a strict diet to help reduce the risk of flare-ups.

Crohn's disease is a very painful condition with no cure. What is important for people to keep in mind, however, is that with a healthy diet and the proper management techniques, it is possible to go for months or even years between flare-ups. While there is no known cure for Crohn's disease, most patients live a full and normal life. Flare-ups are painful and cause many symptoms, but when properly controlled, they are temporary and often cause no long-term disruption in the life of Crohn's patients.