

Ulcerative Colitis

What is Ulcerative Colitis?

Ulcerative colitis is an autoimmune disease that causes the lining of the large intestine, or colon, to become inflamed. The immune system in people with ulcerative colitis recognizes the lining of the colon as something foreign to the body and attacks it. This causes inflammation of the lining of the colon and small sores, or ulcers to develop. These ulcers then produce pus and mucous, causing many of the symptoms of ulcerative colitis.

The exact cause of ulcerative colitis is unknown, but genetics and a malfunctioning immune system likely play a role in getting it. Typically, the disease affects people in their mid-30s, but it can occur at any age.

Ulcerative colitis is an inflammatory bowel disease, like Crohn's disease. But these diseases are not the same and should not be confused with each other.

What are Symptoms of Ulcerative Colitis?

The symptoms of ulcerative colitis can range from mild to severe and change over time. Common symptoms include:

- Diarrhea
- Urgent need to move bowels
- Bloody stool
- Crampy abdominal pain
- Weight loss
- Fever
- Fatigue or low energy

It is not uncommon to also experience symptoms that are unrelated to the bowel. Inflammation can occur in large joints, such as the knees or hips, causing swelling and pain. It can also occur in the eyes and skin. Symptoms frequently come and go, with long periods of time between symptom flares, making the diagnosis of ulcerative colitis difficult.

How is Ulcerative Colitis Diagnosed?

There is currently no single test that can be used to diagnose ulcerative colitis, so you are likely to have a number of different types of tests.



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If you think you have ulcerative colitis, you should see your primary care doctor as soon as possible. They will start by asking questions about your symptoms, taking a medical history, and performing a physical exam. You may also have laboratory tests on your blood and stool. Based on the results of these tests, your doctor will likely recommend that you have a colonoscopy, which allows for the colon to be visually inspected and any abnormal areas biopsied. Any tissue biopsy that is taken will be sent to a pathologist and viewed under a microscope to help confirm the diagnosis.

How is Ulcerative Colitis Treated?

There is currently no cure for ulcerative colitis, so treatment is aimed at reducing flares and helping people live healthy lives. Treatment of ulcerative colitis is usually multifaceted and often combines medications along with diet and nutrition changes. Sometimes surgery is required to treat more severe episodes or complications that can occur from ulcerative colitis. Since not everyone with ulcerative colitis responds to treatment the same, you may find that you have to try a few different treatment options before you find the right one for you.

Medications for ulcerative colitis suppress the immune system and prevent the body from attacking itself in order to improve your symptoms. Some medications are designed to stop disease flares and may be used for short periods of time. Other medications are used to prevent the occurrence of flares, so they are used for longer periods of time. It is not uncommon for people to need to use more than one medication to control symptoms, especially if symptoms are more severe.

Some people may find that eating certain foods can cause disease flares, so it is reasonable to avoid these foods. Dietitians can often help give healthy diet recommendations. Other lifestyle recommendations that can help prevent disease flares include: getting regular exercise, not smoking, and avoiding nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (such as ibuprofen, naproxen).

Up to one-third of people will find that medications do not successfully control symptoms or they develop complications from their disease. In these situations, surgery to remove the entire colon is often recommended and can result in significant improvement or cure. But surgery can have long-term consequences, so it is not used as a first choice.

What is the Prognosis of Ulcerative Colitis?

Ulcerative colitis is a chronic life-long disease that typically follows a pattern of disease flare-ups followed by symptom-free periods, or remission. Because of this, lifelong treatment and monitoring is needed.

Having ulcerative colitis increases the risk of getting colon cancer. This risk depends on how long you have had the disease and how much of your colon is affected. Based on your risk, your doctor is likely to recommend colon cancer screening earlier and more often than what is recommended for people without ulcerative colitis.

Where Can You Get More Information About Ulcerative Colitis?

- **Crohn's and Colitis Foundation**
<http://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/>
- **American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons**
<https://www.fascrs.org/patients/disease-condition/ulcerative-colitis>
- **National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases**
<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/digestive-diseases/ulcerative-colitis>

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