

Inflammatory bowel disease

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is the name for a group of conditions that cause the digestive system to become inflamed (red, swollen, and sometimes painful). If you have IBD, the inflammation can cause severe pain, diarrhea, and sometimes bloody stool. Because of the inflammation in your digestive system from IBD, your body cannot absorb all of the nutrients it needs. This can lead to malnutrition, other symptoms of IBD, or other health problems, such as anemia.

Q: What are the different types of IBD?

A: The most common types of IBD are ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. The diseases are similar but affect different parts of the digestive system.

- **Ulcerative colitis** affects the large intestine and rectum. The disease causes swelling and tiny open sores, or ulcers, on the surface of the lining of the large intestine or rectum. The ulcers can bleed and produce pus. With ulcerative colitis, there is a continuous area of damage along the large intestine and rectum rather than patches of damage.
- **Crohn's disease** can affect any part of the digestive system, from the mouth to the anus. Inflammation in Crohn's disease often happens in patches on digestive organs such as the stomach or intestines. With Crohn's, there is normal tissue next to an inflamed area, or patches of damage.

Q: How does IBD affect women?

A: IBD affects women in unique ways. IBD can cause:

- **More menstrual symptoms.** Women with IBD are more likely to experience premenstrual symptoms, such as headache and menstrual pain. Diarrhea, abdominal pain, and other IBD symptoms may be more severe before and during your period.

- **Iron-deficiency anemia.** The risk of iron-deficiency anemia is higher for women who have IBD than for women who do not have IBD. If you have IBD, your body may not absorb iron well, and you have a higher risk of bleeding in the digestive system.
- **Trouble getting pregnant.** During a flare-up of your IBD symptoms, you may have trouble getting pregnant.

Q: What are the symptoms of IBD?

A: The symptoms of IBD are often similar for ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease:

- Diarrhea (often loose and watery with Crohn's disease or bloody with ulcerative colitis)
- Severe or chronic cramping pain in the abdomen
- Loss of appetite, leading to weight loss
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Rectal bleeding
- Joint pain
- Skin problems, such as rashes

Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Your symptoms can sometimes go away for months or even years (called remission) before coming back (called a flare-up).

Q: How does IBD affect pregnancy?

A: You may have more trouble getting pregnant during a flare-up. Also, if you have IBD, talk to your doctor about your risk of problems during pregnancy.

If you have a flare-up during pregnancy, you have a slightly higher risk of premature birth, low birth weight, and cesarean delivery (C-section) than women who do not have IBD.

Your doctor may also change the type or amount of the medicine you take. Some medicines for IBD cause birth defects and other health problems and should not be taken while you are pregnant or breastfeeding.

Some women say their symptoms get better during pregnancy, but others say they get worse. Women whose IBD is in remission before getting pregnant are more likely to stay symptom-free during pregnancy.

Q: How is IBD treated?

A: Treatments for IBD may include:

- **Medicines.** Medicines used to treat IBD help reduce inflammation, calm the immune system, relieve symptoms, and prevent future flare-ups.

You may need to try several different medicines before you find what works best for you.

- **Surgery.** More than half of people with Crohn's disease need surgery within 20 years of being diagnosed. Almost 1 in 3 people with ulcerative colitis may need surgery to treat the ulcerative colitis at some point. The type of procedure your doctor does depends on your symptoms and how severe they are, your age, and how the procedure will affect your quality of life, such as the types of activities you do.

Talk with your doctor about steps you can take at home to help control your symptoms and prevent flare-ups.

For more information...

For more information about IBD, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Kidney and Urologic Diseases Information Clearinghouse, NIDDK, NIH, HHS
301-496-3583 • www.niddk.nih.gov

American Gastroenterological Association
301-654-2055 • www.gastro.org

Crohn's & Colitis Foundation
1-800-932-2423 • www.ccfa.org

North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition
215-233-0808 • www.naspghan.org

American College of Gastroenterology
301-263-9000 • patients.gi.org

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