



Milan S. Chakrabarty, M.D.
General Gastroenterology

Sandra Del Valle, PA-C
Gastroenterology Physician Assistant

Indraneel Chakrabarty, M.D., M.A.
Advanced & Interventional
Gastroenterology

Kathleen Linke, PA-C
Gastroenterology Physician Assistant

Two Locations:

HEMET

1003 E. Florida Avenue · Suite 101 · Hemet, CA 92543 · (951) 652-2252

TEMECULA

31515 Rancho Pueblo Rd. · Suite 202 · Temecula, CA 92592
(951) 383-6001 (By appt.)

DIVERTICULAR DISEASE

Many of us haven't even heard of it, but 10 percent of Americans older than 40 and about half of Americans 60 and older have diverticular disease. Diverticular disease consists of two conditions: diverticulosis and diverticulitis.

Diverticulosis occurs when small pouches, known as diverticula, form in the walls of the large intestine or colon where arteries penetrate the wall of the colon. Diverticulitis occurs when those pouches, or diverticula, become infected or inflamed. Between 10 and 25 percent of people with diverticulosis develop diverticulitis. Diverticular bleeding occurs when one of these pouches bleeds from the artery.

Causes:

Diverticular disease is believed to be caused by increased pressure in the colon. The colon weakens with age and with increased pressure, small pouches called diverticula form an individual pouch and diverticulosis for multiple pouches. Over time, these pouches bulge out at the weakest places in the colon wall where arteries penetrate. This condition is called diverticulosis. Diverticulitis occurs when undigested food or waste matter is trapped inside the diverticula, causing the pouches to become inflamed or infected.

Diverticulosis is sometimes related to constipation. Normally your colon muscles move waste through your system. However, when waste material is repeatedly unbulky, hard, and dry, the muscles have to squeeze harder with more force. This will cause formation of out-pouches called diverticulosis to form in the wall of the colon where arteries penetrate over time.

In addition to not getting enough fiber and fluids, other causes of diverticulosis include:

- Lack of exercise
- Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement
- Stress and anxiety
- A side effect of medication
- Changes in life and routine, such as increased travel

Symptoms:

If you have diverticulosis, there's a good chance you don't know it. Usually, diverticulosis does not cause any problems and can only be detected by diagnostic testing. When symptoms are present, they may include constipation, mild pain, cramping, diarrhea, and bloating. Since other conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome, have similar symptoms, see your doctor if these symptoms occur.

When a diverticula becomes infected, it is called diverticulitis. The most common symptom of diverticulitis is abdominal pain or cramping, which usually occurs on the left side. Other symptoms include nausea, vomiting, fever, and constipation.

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Diverticular Disease Checklist:

Diverticulosis:

- Usually no symptoms
- Occasional mild abdominal pain, cramping, or bloating, most common on the left side
- Disturbed bowel habits, occasional constipation, or diarrhea

Diverticulitis:

- Abdominal pain or cramping, severe at times, usually on left side
- Fever
- Nausea and vomiting
- Disturbed bowel habits, constipation, diarrhea, watery stools
- Rectal bleeding (rarely)

Treatment:

If you think you have symptoms of diverticular disease, see your doctor. He or she will ask about your bowel habits and history. The doctor may also perform a physical examination. In some cases, other tests may be necessary.

These tests may include blood tests, x-rays, and colonoscopy, in which the doctor is able to examine the entire colon by using a long tube-like instrument with a high definition CCD chip.

In cases of diverticulosis, drink plenty of fluids and increase the fiber in your diet. In cases of diverticulitis, antibiotics may be prescribed to clear up the infected diverticula and a liquid diet may be suggested. If attacks of diverticulitis are severe or frequent, surgical resection of the affected colon may be required.

Prevention:

There are several ways you can help prevent and manage diverticular disease. The following tips will help keep your colon functioning normally:

- Eat more fiber.
 - Choose whole-grain breads and cereals over white flour.
 - Use brown rice in recipes that call for white and add plenty of vegetables and fruits to your daily diet.
 - Leave skin on apples, peppers, and plums, increasing their fiber value.
 - Take a Metamucil® Fiber Supplement product or Konsyl fiber daily to boost your fiber intake.
 - Drink plenty of fluids; this has been shown to decrease the pressure in your colon, help soften stools, and promote regular elimination.
- Don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement. Delaying now can mean straining later, which increases the pressure in your colon.
- Exercise regularly.