

Patient information: Crohn's disease in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is Crohn's disease? — Crohn's disease is a disorder that can cause diarrhea, belly pain, and other symptoms that affect the digestive tract. The digestive tract is the part of the body and takes in and breaks down food. It includes the mouth, the stomach, and the intestines.

When it is working normally, the body's immune system kills germs and "bad" cells that could turn into cancer. Sometimes, instead of killing only bad cells, something goes wrong and the immune system starts to attack healthy cells. That is called an "autoimmune response." It is what happens in Crohn's disease. If you have Crohn's disease, your body is attacking the lining of the digestive tract. This causes inflammation, which can lead to sores (ulcers) and bleeding.

The symptoms of Crohn's disease can get better or worse at different times. But the condition cannot be cured. Luckily, there are medicines and other treatments that can improve its symptoms.

What are the symptoms of Crohn's disease? — The most common symptoms are diarrhea, belly pain, feeling tired, weight loss, and fever. Some people with Crohn's disease also get mouth sores, skin rashes, joint pain, and eye redness.

Is there a test for Crohn's disease? — Yes. There are a few tests that can help diagnose Crohn's disease. Doctors use x-rays or scans to look at the upper intestine and a test called "colonoscopy" to look at the lower intestine. During a colonoscopy, the doctor puts a thin tube into your rectum and threads it up into your colon. The tube has a camera attached to it, so the doctor can look inside your colon.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. Your symptoms might improve if you:

- Cut down on foods that make your symptoms worse. Some people have problems with foods that have a lot of fiber, such as fruits and vegetables.
- Quit smoking, if you smoke. Smoking makes symptoms worse and increases the chances that you will need surgery.
- Avoid medicines such as [ibuprofen](#) (sold as Motrin® or Advil®) and [naproxen](#) (sold as Aleve®)

How is Crohn's disease treated? — There are many different medicines that help reduce the symptoms of Crohn's disease. Almost all of these medicines work by reducing inflammation and the body's immune response. Some medicines treat symptoms when they are at their worst. Other medicines help keep symptoms from starting up or coming back. Doctors sometimes also prescribe antibiotics to people with Crohn's disease. You might have to try a few different medicines before you find the one that works best for you.

Is surgery an option? — Surgery is helpful if medicines do not do enough to control your symptoms or if the medicines cause side effects that you can't stand. Surgery does not cure the disease, but it can help you to feel better and return to normal activities. The two most common types of surgery to treat Crohn's disease work by:

- Removing of the diseased part of the colon
- Re-opening parts of the colon that have become blocked

Does Crohn's disease lead to colon cancer? — It can. Your risk depends on how long you've had it and whether your colon is affected. Experts suggest that people with Crohn's disease that affects the colon get screened early and often. This might mean having a colonoscopy a few years after being diagnosed, and once a year after that.

What will my life be like? — People with Crohn's disease often need lifelong treatment. But with treatment, many people with the condition are able to live fairly normal lives.

What if I want to get pregnant? — In most cases, Crohn's disease does not affect a woman's ability to get pregnant. If you want to get pregnant, talk to your doctor or nurse before you start trying to get pregnant. He or she can make sure you get all the tests you need before and during your pregnancy. Plus, your doctor or nurse might want to switch your medicines. That's because some of the medicines used to treat Crohn's disease may not be safe for a baby.