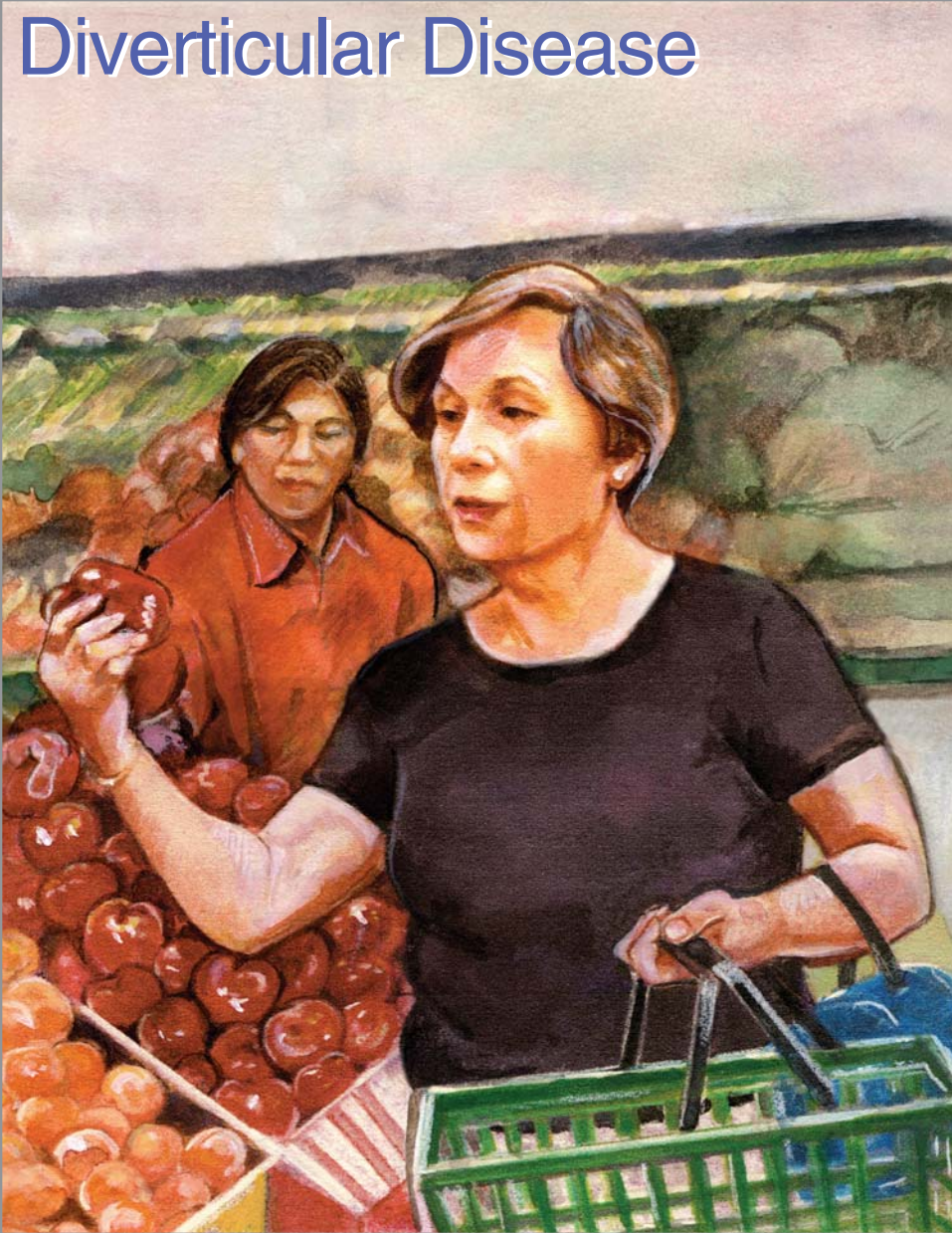


# What I need to know about Diverticular Disease



NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH  
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse



U.S. Department  
of Health and  
Human Services



# What I need to know about Diverticular Disease



NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH  
National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse



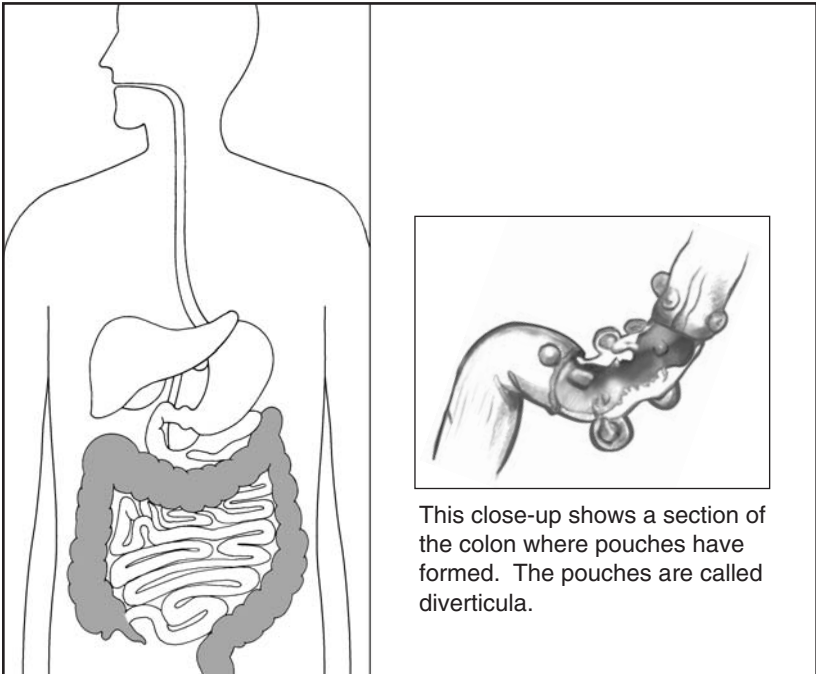
# Contents

What is diverticular disease? .....	1
What causes diverticular disease? .....	2
Is diverticular disease serious? .....	2
What are the symptoms of diverticular disease? .....	3
Who gets diverticular disease? .....	3
How does the doctor test for diverticular disease? .....	4
How is diverticular disease treated? .....	6
How is diverticulosis treated? .....	6
How is diverticulitis treated? .....	7
What can I do about diverticular disease? .....	8
Points to Remember .....	10
Pronunciation Guide .....	10
For More Information .....	11
Acknowledgments .....	12



## What is diverticular disease?

**Diverticular\*** disease affects the colon. The colon is part of the large intestine that removes waste from your body. Diverticular disease is made up of two conditions: **diverticulosis** and **diverticulitis**. Diverticulosis occurs when pouches, called **diverticula**, form in the colon. These pouches bulge out like weak spots in a tire. Diverticulitis occurs if the pouches become inflamed.



The shaded area is the colon.

\*See Pronunciation Guide on page 10.

## What causes diverticular disease?

Doctors are not sure what causes diverticular disease. Many think a diet low in fiber is the main cause. Fiber is a part of food that your body cannot digest. It is found in many fruits and vegetables. Fiber stays in the colon and absorbs water, which makes bowel movements easier to pass. Diets low in fiber may cause constipation, which occurs when stools are hard and difficult to pass. Constipation causes your muscles to strain when you pass stool. Straining may cause diverticula to form in the colon. If stool or bacteria get caught in the pouches, diverticulitis can occur.

## Is diverticular disease serious?

Most people with the disease do not have serious problems, but some people have severe symptoms. Diverticulitis can attack suddenly and cause

- bleeding
- serious infections
- rips in the pouches
- fistula, which is a connection or passage between tissues or organs in the body that normally do not connect
- blockage in your digestive system
- an infection in which the colon ruptures causing stool to empty from the colon into the abdomen



## What are the symptoms of diverticular disease?

The symptoms for diverticulosis and diverticulitis are different.

**Diverticulosis.** Many people don't have symptoms, but some people have cramping, bloating, and constipation. Some people also have bleeding, inflammation, and fistulas. If you are bleeding, bright red blood will pass through your rectum. The rectum is the end of the colon that connects to the anus. The rectum and anus are part of the gastrointestinal tract, which is the passage that food goes through. Rectal bleeding is usually painless, but it can be dangerous. You should see a doctor right away.

**Diverticulitis.** People with diverticulitis can have many symptoms. Often pain is felt in the lower part of the abdomen. If you have diverticulitis, you may have fevers, feel sick to your stomach, vomit, or have a change in your bowel habits.

## Who gets diverticular disease?

Many people get diverticular disease. Starting at age 40, the chance of getting it increases about every 10 years. About half of people between the ages of 60 and 80 have diverticular disease. Almost everyone over 80 has it.

## How does the doctor test for diverticular disease?

The doctor can test for diverticular disease many ways. A CT scan is the most common test used. The doctor will inject a liquid in a vein in your arm that better highlights your organs on x rays. You may be asked to drink liquid called barium instead of getting an injection. You are then placed in a large doughnut-shaped machine that takes x rays.

Other tests include

- **Medical history.** The doctor will ask about your health and symptoms such as pain. You will be asked about your bowel habits, diet, and any medications you take.
- **Blood test.** This test can help detect infections.
- **Stool sample.** This test may show bleeding in the digestive tract.
- **Digital rectal exam.** The doctor will insert a gloved finger into your rectum to check for pain, bleeding, or a blockage.
- **X ray and barium enema.** The doctor will insert liquid called barium in the large intestine through your anus. The anus is the opening where stool leaves the body. The barium makes the diverticula show up on an x ray.

- **Colonoscopy.** The doctor will insert a small tube through your anus. A tiny video camera is in the tube and will show if there are any pouches.



## How is diverticular disease treated?

Treatment for diverticular disease depends on how serious the problem is and whether you are suffering from diverticulosis or diverticulitis.

Most people get better by changing their diet.

If you have rectal bleeding, you need to go to the hospital so a doctor can find the part of your colon that is bleeding. The doctor may use a special drug that makes the bleeding stop. The doctor may also decide to operate and remove the part of the colon that is bleeding.

## How is diverticulosis treated?

Eating high-fiber foods can help relieve symptoms. Sometimes mild pain medications also help.

## How is diverticulitis treated?

A doctor may prescribe antibiotics and recommend following a liquid diet. Most people get better with this treatment. Some people may need surgery and other treatments.

- **Surgery.** Serious problems from diverticulitis are treated with surgery. Surgeons can clean the abdomen after infections and remove bleeding pouches and fistulas.
- **Colon resection.** If you get diverticulitis many times, your doctor might suggest taking out the part of the colon with diverticula. The healthy sections can be joined together. With the diverticula gone, you may avoid other infections.
- **Emergency surgery.** If you have severe problems, you may need emergency surgery to clear the infection and remove part of the colon. Later, a second surgery rejoins the healthy sections of the colon. The colon is separated for a brief time between surgeries, because rejoining the colon during the first surgery is not always safe. A temporary colostomy is needed between the two surgeries. A colostomy is an opening made on the abdomen where a plastic bag is connected to collect stool after food is digested. The surgeon makes the opening, called a stoma, and connects it to the end of the colon.

## What can I do about diverticular disease?

Eat a high-fiber diet to help prevent problems. Talk to your doctor about using fiber products like Benefiber, Citrucel, or Metamucil. Daily use can help you get the fiber you need if you do not get it through your diet.

Ask your doctor about which food choices are right for you.

Eating foods high in fiber is simple and can help reduce diverticular disease symptoms and problems.



High-fiber foods include fruits and vegetables.

Try eating more of the following:

- **Fruit.** Raw apples, peaches, pears, and tangerines.
- **Vegetables.** Fresh broccoli, squash, carrots, and brussels sprouts.
- **Starchy vegetables.** Potatoes, baked beans, kidney beans, and lima beans.
- **Grains.** Whole-wheat bread, brown rice, bran flake cereal, and oatmeal.

Talk with your doctor about making diet changes. Learn what to eat and how to put more of these high-fiber foods in your diet.

## Points to Remember

- Diverticular disease is more common in people as they grow older.
- A low-fiber diet is the most likely cause of the disease.
- Most people are treated with a high-fiber diet and pain medication.
- Add whole grain foods, high-fiber fruits, and vegetables to your diet.
- Contact a doctor if you notice symptoms such as fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, rectal bleeding, or change in bowel habits.

## Pronunciation Guide

diverticula (DY-vur-TIK-yoo-luh)

diverticular (DY-vur-TIK-yoo-lur)

diverticulitis (DY-vur-TIK-yoo-LY-tiss)

diverticulosis (DY-vur-TIK-yoo-LOH-siss)



## For More Information

### **International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders**

P.O. Box 170864

Milwaukee, WI 53217-8076

Phone: 1-888-964-2001 or 414-964-1799

Fax: 414-964-7176

Email: [iffgd@iffgd.org](mailto:iffgd@iffgd.org)

Internet: [www.iffgd.org](http://www.iffgd.org)

### **American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons**

85 W. Algonquin Road, Suite 550

Arlington Heights, IL 60005

Phone: 847-290-9184

Fax: 847-290-9203

Email: [ascrs@fascrs.org](mailto:ascrs@fascrs.org)

Internet: [www.fascrs.org](http://www.fascrs.org)

The U.S. Government does not endorse or favor any specific commercial product or company. Trade, proprietary, or company names appearing in this document are used only because they are considered necessary in the context of the information provided. If a product is not mentioned, the omission does not mean or imply that the product is unsatisfactory.

## Acknowledgments

The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) would like to thank the following individual for assisting with the scientific and editorial review of this publication.

Joshua Katz, M.D.

George Washington University School  
of Medicine

Thank you also to Vicki L. McClelland, executive director of the Free Medical Clinic of the Northern Shenandoah Valley in Winchester, VA, for facilitating field-testing of this publication.

# National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse

2 Information Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3570  
Phone: 1-800-891-5389  
Fax: 703-738-4929  
Email: [nddic@info.niddk.nih.gov](mailto:nddic@info.niddk.nih.gov)  
Internet: [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov)

The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the Clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. The NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

Publications produced by the Clearinghouse are carefully reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts.

This publication is not copyrighted. The Clearinghouse encourages users of this booklet to duplicate and distribute as many copies as desired.

This booklet is also available at [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov).



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND HUMAN SERVICES  
National Institutes of Health



National Institute of Diabetes and  
Digestive and Kidney Diseases

NIH Publication No. 07-5535  
June 2007