

# Diet and Diverticular disease

Diverticular disease is very common affecting about half of all 60 year old and nearly all 80 year olds. However only a small percentage of people with diverticular disease will have symptoms.

## What is diverticular disease ?

As the colon ages it weakens this can lead to a bulge or pocket forming on the wall of the bowel rather like a bulge in an old tyre. Diverticula can occur throughout the gastrointestinal tract, but are seen most commonly in the sigmoid and descending colon (left side of the colon). A diverticulum consists of a herniation of mucosa through the thickened colonic muscle. Diverticula vary from solitary findings to many hundreds. They are typically 5-10 mm in diameter but can exceed 2 cm.

## What are the risk factors for diverticular disease ?

Diverticular disease is rare in people younger than 40 years and is rare in rural Africa and Asia. The highest prevalence seen in Western societies where it is believed that refined diets low in fibre cause chronically raised pressure in the colon.

## What are the symptoms of diverticular disease ?

Approximately three quarters of patients with diverticular disease remain asymptomatic. The condition is often diagnosed while the patient is being investigated for other conditions eg. screening for colon cancer.

Patients can present with non-specific abdominal complaints, e.g. disturbed bowel function, bloating or lower abdominal pain, usually left-sided. Pain is generally exacerbated by eating and diminished with defecation or flatus.

## What symptoms might I experience with Diverticulitis ?

If the diverticulum becomes inflamed (diverticulitis) then the patient may develop symptoms of varying severity depending upon how inflamed the diverticulum becomes.

Generally patients present with left lower quadrant pain. Asian patients have predominantly right-sided diverticula and will usually present with right lower quadrant pain. Pain may be intermittent or constant and may be associated with a change in bowel habits. Fever is present in most patients. The patient may go off their food and have nausea and vomiting.

One third of patients who develop diverticulitis will develop further complications. The inflamed diverticulum may form an abscess. This gives more severe pain and more severe symptoms of infection (swinging temperature, rigors, racing pulse). Sometimes the diverticulum erodes into a nearby structure creating a fistula. If this is the bladder then the patient may pass flatus and faecal material in their urine. Occasionally the diverticulum can perforated into the abdominal cavity causing peritonitis. This is a surgical emergency.

### **How should I adjust my diet to manage my diverticular disease ?**

The large intestine becomes weaker with age and the pressure of hard stools passing through the large intestine is thought to cause the formation of diverticula. Following a healthy balanced diet high in fibre, and making sure you drink lots of fluid can make your stools easier to pass and should reduce the risk of diverticula developing.

However, once you have diverticular disease the severity of the condition can influence the kinds of foods you can tolerate. If you have uncomplicated diverticular disease which is painless then you should continue to follow the diet described above - a healthy balanced diet high in fibre, and making sure you drink plenty of fluid so that your stools pass with ease. However, during an attack of diverticulitis or if the bowel remains damaged following diverticulitis then high fibre foods can be difficult to tolerate and can exacerbate the pain of the condition and so are best avoided in these situations.

#### **Fibre:**

Fibre (sometimes known as roughage) is found in plant based food products. Fibre gets completely or partially broken down in the large intestine. A food product is 'high fibre' if it contains at least 6g of fibre per 100g. This information can often be found on the nutrition labels on the back or side of food packaging. Good sources of fibre include:

**Cereals and other starchy carbohydrates** such as bran flakes, porridge, wholewheat breakfast cereals, and wholemeal or wholegrain pasta, rice, bread, crackers and biscuits

**Fruits and vegetables** such as broccoli, sweetcorn, cabbage, onion, apple, raspberries, blackberries, plums, and prunes

**Nuts and seeds** such as almonds, peanuts, linseeds, hazelnuts, and sunflower seeds

**Peas, beans and pulses** such as baked beans, kidney beans, chickpeas, lentils, hummus, dhal, and peas

Aim to eat at least 5 portions of fruits and vegetables a day as part of a healthy balanced diet. A portion is 80 grams. Fresh, frozen, dried and canned all count. Slowly increase the amount of fibre you eat. Increasing the amount of fibre in your diet too quickly can cause bloating and wind.

### **Fluid:**

Drinking plenty of fluids is important when you are increasing your fibre intake. Fibre soaks up fluid and draws water into your stools to keep them soft and bulky, making it easier to pass a motion. Without enough fluid, fibre does not work properly. Aim to have 6 to 8 cups (1.5 to 2 litres) of fluid each day. Good sources of fluid include water, tea, coffee, juice, squash, and soup.

**Should I avoid nuts and seeds?** It is often recommended that people with diverticular disease avoid seeds, nuts, corn, popcorn and tomatoes. However, there is no proof that this is needed or helpful. So only avoid these foods if they cause you to have symptoms.

### **What should I eat if I develop diverticulitis or painful diverticular disease?**

It is usually recommended that whilst the diverticula are inflamed you reduce your fibre intake to help the large intestine recover. Once your symptoms improve, you can gradually return to a high fibre diet. Choose food products that contain less than 3g of fibre per 100g. Avoid whole-grain food products and choose white bread, crackers, pasta and rice. Choose cakes, puddings and pastries made with white flour and avoid those with added fruit or nuts. Choose plain biscuits for example rich tea. Choose breakfast cereals not high in fibre such as rice pops and cornflakes. Remove the skins, stalks and/or pith from vegetables and fruit, and limit to 2 portions of each a day.