

Signs, Symptoms and Causes of Crohn's Disease

What Is Crohn's Disease?

Crohn's disease is a chronic inflammatory condition of the gastrointestinal tract or gut.

This disease is not the same as ulcerative colitis, another type of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), although the symptoms of these two can be similar, the areas affected in the gut are different.

Crohn's most commonly affects the end of the small bowel (the ileum) and the beginning of the colon, but it may affect any part of the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, from the mouth to the anus. Ulcerative colitis is limited to the colon, also called the large intestine.

Crohn's disease can also affect the entire thickness of the bowel wall, leaving normal areas in between patches of diseased intestine while ulcerative colitis only involves the innermost lining of the colon and does not skip any areas.

What Causes Crohn's Disease?

Crohn's disease may affect as many as 700,000 Americans. Men and women are equally likely to be affected. Although the disease can occur at any age, it is more prevalent among adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15 and 35.

The causes are not well understood. Diet and stress may aggravate the disease, but they do not cause it. Recent research suggests hereditary, genetics, and/or environmental factors may also play a role.

In people with IBD, the immune system in the intestine produces chronic inflammation which does not subside, leading to ulceration, thickening of the intestinal wall, and patient symptoms.

Crohn's tends to run in families, so if you or a close relative have the disease, your family members have a significantly increased chance of developing this disease. Studies have shown that 5% to 20% of affected individuals have a first – degree relative (parents, child, or sibling) with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). The risk is greater with Crohn's disease than ulcerative colitis. The risk is also substantially higher when both parents have IBD. The disease is most common among people of eastern European background, including Jews of European descent. In recent years, an increasing number of cases have been reported among African American populations.

Crohn's is more common in developed countries rather than undeveloped countries, in northern rather than southern climates and in urban rather than rural settings.

Symptoms

Crohn's disease can affect any part of the GI tract. While symptoms vary from patient to patient and some may be more common than others, the common symptoms of Crohn's disease include:

- Diarrhea
- Rectal bleeding
- Urgent need to move bowels
- Abdominal cramps and pain
- Sensation of incomplete evacuation
- Constipation
- Fever
- Weight loss
- Night Sweats
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite

Proper testing performed by your health care provider can render a diagnosis if you are having these symptoms.

Crohn's is a chronic disease, so this means patients will likely experience periods when the disease flares up and causes symptoms, followed by periods of remission when patients may not notice symptoms at all.

In more severe cases, Crohn's can lead to tears (fissures) in the lining of the anus, which may cause pain and bleeding, especially during bowel movements. Inflammation may also cause a fistula to develop. A fistula is a tunnel that leads from one loop of intestine to another, or that connects the intestine to the bladder, vagina, or skin. This is a serious condition that requires immediate medical attention.

The symptoms you may experience depend on which part of the GI tract is affected.