

Signs, Symptoms and Causes of Ulcerative Colitis

Ulcerative colitis (UC) is an inflammatory condition of the large intestine and rectum. Physicians perform tests to determine the location and severity of this condition. Symptoms may vary depending on the degree and extent of inflammation.

Prevalence

About 700,000 people in the United States have UC, with males and females affected equally. On average, people are diagnosed with UC in their mid-30s, with peak onset between 15 and 25 years of age and a second lesser peak between 55 and 65 years of age.

What Causes it?

Researchers believe that UC can result from various causes including genetic, environmental, and immune system factors. Clinical studies to date have not confirmed that diet or food allergies can either cause or treat this condition and there is no specific diet that patients with the disease should follow.

Genetic: About 20% of patients have a close relative with ulcerative colitis. The prevalence of ulcerative colitis is higher among those of Jewish heritage and white people of European origin.

Environmental: Certain factors (intestinal bacteria, geographic location, social issues, non-steroidal inflammatory medications) may stimulate or affect the immune system to cause inflammation that results in UC.

Immune System: Certain proteins in the intestine may be mistaken for foreign substances called antigens, which may cause inflammation and activate the body's defense systems. This inflammation can persist resulting in inflammation of the colon (colitis).

What are the common symptoms?

Persistent diarrhea: Diarrhea and urgency (tenesmus) can occur many times during the day often with blood in the stool

Crampy abdominal pain: Pain is often intermittent and the abdomen can be tender with a dull, constant ache depending on the location

Other symptoms include loss of appetite, fatigue, weight loss and fevers.