

Frequently Asked Questions – Children and Adolescents

What Are The Early Signs Of Crohn's And Colitis In Children?

The diagnosis of ulcerative colitis in children tends to be relatively straightforward. A typical early sign is progressive loosening of the stool, which often contains mucus and blood and which may or may not be accompanied by abdominal pain. Diarrhoea can develop slowly or begin quite suddenly.

Among children with Crohn's disease, the signs can be quite vague at first, confusing the diagnosis. Common early signs are abdominal pain and weight loss or failure to gain weight, which can appear long before a diagnosis is made. In other children, loose stools and cramps-like abdominal pain might appear at the same time. The pain tends to be felt just above the navel on the right side of the abdomen and often occurs just after a meal. Pain, loss of appetite, and weight loss are also common symptoms of Crohn's disease, which might also come with diarrhoea. The child might also feel tired and lacking in energy as a consequence of blood loss and iron deficiency.

Children will often try to avoid eating in order to prevent symptoms; this can worsen their fatigue. Sometimes, the unexplained abdominal pain, loss of appetite, and weight loss might be incorrectly attributed to allergies to certain foods, a fear of attending school, or other psychological problems such as anorexia nervosa (an eating disorder).

In other children, early signs of Crohn's disease might be sores in and around the anal area such as fissures, fistulae, abscesses, skin tags, etc. Less often, a child might complain of joint pain and fever long before any gastrointestinal symptoms develop. In rare instances, a child might be treated for arthritis for years before any abdominal symptoms appear. Sometimes, an early sign of Crohn's disease in a child is a failure to grow for months or even years before any other signs of the condition are present.

Do Children Outgrow Crohn's And Colitis?

The short answer is no. Both ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease are considered to be chronic conditions that more or less last for a lifetime. But many people, including children, experience long symptom-free periods because of spontaneous remission or a favourable response to the medications used to treat their condition. Also, many people who have had surgery to treat their condition experience a better quality of life when they no longer have to put up with painful and distressing symptoms or take medications to control their disease.

What Is 'Growth Failure'?

Growth failure is a medical term used to describe a growth rate that is below the appropriate growth velocity (speed) for age. Important clues to growth failure includes a child noticing that he or she is shorter than other children in the same class. Parents might notice that the size of a child's shoe or clothing has remained the same for a longer period of time than expected, or that the child is not gaining weight, or is perhaps even losing weight.

Since infancy, your child would have had a growth chart which a health nurse uses to monitor a child's growth rate compared with the average growth rate of similar-aged children, as well as with their genetic potential based on the height of their parents. If growth failure is suspected in your child, or is indicated in the growth chart, x-rays can be used to confirm a delay in bone development.

There is no evidence to suggest that levels of growth hormone are deficient in children with IBD. Although growth might be delayed in children and adolescents with IBD, if their IBD is treated well and they go into remission, they usually catch up in time, sometimes even into their late teens and early 20s.