

## When To Seek Medical Attention

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### The Signs & Symptoms of Crohn's Disease

There is no doubt that inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is a serious medical condition. During flare-ups and when the disease is active, symptoms can be troublesome, distressing, and downright embarrassing. Most people with IBD will need to take medications on an ongoing basis, even during periods of remission, to keep the inflammation in check and prevent flare-ups. There might be times where you will need to be in hospital—for example, if you become severely dehydrated or develop a complication. At some point you might also have to face the prospect of surgery, either to treat the disease itself or for complications associated with your condition.

But the good news is that IBD is manageable: it will not necessarily take over your entire life, and the life expectancy of those with the disease is normal. With the current range of treatment options available, most people are able to lead full and productive lives, complete with family, career, leisure activities, and travel.

However it is important to be aware of any change that may indicate a flare-up, a worsening of the condition, or that a new problem has developed so that prompt action can be taken.

Typical signs & symptoms include:

- frequent, watery diarrhoea
- sense of urgency to have a bowel movement
- crampy abdominal pain
- a feeling of 'blockage'
- fever during active stages of disease
- rectal bleeding (if the colon is involved)
- loss of appetite
- tiredness and fatigue
- weight loss.

The signs and symptoms of Crohn's disease can vary considerably among those who have the condition, depending on the location and severity of the inflammation within the GI tract. For example, if a narrowing (stricture) occurs in the intestinal wall at the site of the inflammation—especially in the upper parts of the GI tract—there could be nausea, vomiting, bloating, and constipation. Crohn's disease in the colon can mimic the effects of ulcerative colitis, often making it difficult to differentiate between the two conditions.

People with Crohn's disease often feel tired and are easily fatigued. Inflammation in the small intestine can impair the digestion and absorption of essential nutrients from food, which adds to the tiredness and fatigue. This is often complicated by the fact that, during active stages of the disease, many people try to avoid eating in order to prevent their symptoms from worsening, perhaps not realising that inadequate intake of food and fluids can cause sudden and severe dehydration and, over time, lead to malnutrition. This is an important consideration for anyone with Crohn's disease, especially the children and adolescents who might experience delayed growth or pubertal development as a result. For this reason, a dietitian or nutritionist is an important member of the clinical team, especially for children and young people with Crohn's disease.

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In addition to symptoms related to the GI tract, Crohn's disease can also cause symptoms in other parts of the body. These include:

- red itchy eyes
- sores in the mouth
- swollen and painful joints
- bumps or lesions on the skin
- thinning of the bones (osteoporosis)
- kidney stones
- (rarely) hepatitis or cirrhosis of the liver.

Another common feature of Crohn's disease is inflammation around the anus. This may take the form of abscesses (sacs filled with fluid, bacteria, and pus), fissures (ulcerated cracks) or fistulae (channels leading from the intestine to other body organs). A narrowing of the intestinal wall can result from the swelling and inflammation during active disease, as well as from the formation of scar tissue (fibrotic strictures) following prolonged inflammation.

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### The Signs And Symptoms Of Ulcerative Colitis

There is no doubt that inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is a serious medical condition. During flare-ups and when the disease is active, symptoms can be troublesome, distressing, and downright embarrassing. Most people with IBD will need to take medications on an ongoing basis, even during periods of remission, to keep the inflammation in check and prevent flare-ups. There might be times where you will need to be in hospital—for example, if you become severely dehydrated or develop a complication. At some point you might also have to face the prospect of surgery, either to treat the disease itself or for complications associated with your condition.

But the good news is that IBD is manageable: it will not necessarily take over your entire life, and the life expectancy of those with the disease is normal. With the current range of treatment options available, most people are able to lead full and productive lives, complete with family, career, leisure activities, and travel.

However it is important to be aware of any change that may indicate a flare-up, a worsening of the condition, or that a new problem has developed so that prompt action can be taken.

Typical signs & symptoms include:

- frequent, watery diarrhoea often containing blood, mucus and pus
- sense of urgency to have a bowel movement (especially when the rectum is involved)
- crampy abdominal pain (often because of constipation in unaffected parts of the colon)
- tiredness, fatigue
- loss of appetite
- weight loss.

As the lining of the colon becomes more and more inflamed, it loses its ability to absorb water from the liquid waste that passes through from the ileum. This leads to watery diarrhoea, often containing mucus and pus. Among those affected, many will feel crampy abdominal pain and a strong urgency to have frequent bowel movements. It is common to feel tired and easily fatigued, especially during active phases of the disease. The tiny ulcers in the intestinal lining can easily crack open and bleed. Over time, blood loss can lead to a significant decrease in the number of red blood cells (a condition known as anaemia), which adds to the tiredness and fatigue.

It is not uncommon for those with ulcerative colitis to lose their appetite or to simply avoid eating in order to prevent further symptoms. A lack of adequate nutrition however will worsen the tiredness and fatigue and will eventually lead to weight loss. Children with ulcerative colitis might fail to develop or grow properly, particularly if they have long periods of active disease and/or receive frequent or prolonged treatment with high doses of corticosteroids.

In addition to symptoms in the GI tract, ulcerative colitis can also cause symptoms in other parts of the body. These include:

- red itchy eyes
- sores in the mouth
- swollen and painful joints
- bumps or lesions on the skin (erythema nodosum)

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- thinning of the bones (osteoporosis)
- kidney stones
- a type of hepatitis called primary sclerosing cholangitis.

### When To Call The Doctor

During the course of your IBD, there might be times when you need or want to consult quickly with your doctor by telephone—for example, if you experience sudden and severe symptoms or you develop a worrisome reaction to a new medication.

Many patients hesitate to call their doctor for fear of bothering a busy professional. But doctors often have dedicated staff such as a nurse or assistant who will serve as the first port of call. It's worth asking your doctor whom you should contact and under what circumstances you can call (e.g., sudden and unexpected complications arising from your condition).

A call to your doctor is appropriate if you develop any significant—though not potentially life-threatening—symptoms such as nausea, headache, or body rash that you think might be related to your condition or to its treatment. Reporting severe or unusual symptoms early can help prevent a manageable problem from developing into a far more serious situation.

### Emergency Calls

An emergency call is necessary if you experience any sudden or dramatic changes in your condition, such as:

- severe abdominal pain that lasts for more than one hour
- significant or new rectal bleeding
- persistent vomiting, accompanied by stoppage of bowel movements
- drastic changes in bowel movements without any passing of gas
- high temperature, especially if taking corticosteroids or other medications that might be affecting your immune system.

If you are unable to contact your doctor in an emergency situation, you should go directly to the nearest public hospital emergency department or to the hospital you usually attend. Be prepared to explain your illness and current symptoms. You'll also need to provide the hospital staff with your doctor's name and inform them about any medications you're currently taking. It's useful to carry a list of your medications with you at all times.