



UNITED GASTROENTEROLOGISTS

Patient Education Sheet

Ulcerative Colitis

What is ulcerative colitis? — Ulcerative colitis is a condition that causes diarrhea, belly pain, and bloody bowel movements. These symptoms happen because the large intestine becomes inflamed and gets sores, called “ulcers.” The large intestine is also called the colon.

What are the symptoms of ulcerative colitis? — Symptoms can be mild or severe. They might happen just once. Or they might go away and come back over and over again. Possible symptoms include:

- Diarrhea that might happen 10 or more times a day
- Bloody bowel movements
- Bleeding from the anus
- Mucus coming out of the anus
- Belly cramps
- Fever
- Weight loss
- Swelling and pain in the hips and knees
- Swelling and pain in the eyes, skin, or lungs

Is there a test for ulcerative colitis? — Yes. There are a few tests that can help doctors diagnose ulcerative colitis. Doctors usually use a test called a “sigmoidoscopy” or a similar test called a “colonoscopy”. For these tests, the doctor puts a thin tube into your rectum (the lower part of the large intestine) and threads it up into your colon. The tube has a camera attached to it, so the doctor can look inside your colon. The tube also has tools attached, so the doctor can take samples of tissue to look at under the microscope. Other tests might include X-rays or scans.

Can I do anything on my own to feel better? — Yes. Your symptoms might improve if you:

- Cut down on foods that make your symptoms worse
- Avoid pain medicines such as [ibuprofen](#) (sold as Motrin® or Advil®) and [naproxen](#) (sold as Aleve®). If you need a pain medicine, [acetaminophen](#) (Tylenol) is OK to use.

If you start cutting foods out of your diet, your doctor might suggest that you take a multivitamin and a [folic acid](#) supplement. If you stop eating dairy, you should take calcium and vitamin D. These supplements will make up for nutrients you might be missing.

How is ulcerative colitis treated? — Depending on your symptoms, your doctor might prescribe:

- Medicines that you put directly into your rectum. These reduce swelling in mild cases. It takes about 3 weeks before they start working.
- Medicines that you take in a pill. A common one is called “5-ASA.”
- A brief course of medicines called steroids to reduce swelling. (These are not the same steroids that athletes use to build muscle.)
- Stronger medicines for severe cases. These medicines work on your immune system to protect your colon from damage. Common ones are “6-mercaptopurine” and “[azathioprine](#).”

For most people, symptoms go away after just a few weeks of treatment.

Is surgery an option? — When medicines and changes in diet don’t work, surgery can help. There are two types:

- Surgery to remove the colon, rectum, and anus. People who have this surgery can no longer have bowel movements in the normal way. Instead, their bowel movements come out through a hole in their belly. A plastic bag catches the waste.
- Surgery to remove just the colon and rectum. After this surgery, the doctor reconnects the intestine to the anus. People who have this surgery can have bowel movements in the normal way.

What if I want to get pregnant? — In most cases, ulcerative colitis does not affect a woman's ability to get pregnant. If you want to have a baby, talk to your doctor or nurse before you start trying to get pregnant. He or she can make sure you get all the tests you need before and during your pregnancy. Your doctor or nurse might also want to switch your medicines. That’s because some of the medicines used to treat ulcerative colitis may not be safe for a baby.

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