

Crohn's Disease

What is it?

Crohn's Disease is a chronic (long term) inflammation of the gastro-intestinal (digestive) tract. The inflammation can occur in any part of the tract, from the mouth to the bottom. It is most commonly found in the terminal ileum (last part of the small intestine) and proximal colon (first segment of the large bowel). This disease is one of a group of conditions known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD).

Causes

There is no known cause of Crohn's Disease. It is not thought to be hereditary but may be more common in some families.

Incidence

IBD affects about 1 in 500 in the UK and affects both sexes equally. The incidence of Crohn's Disease has steadily been increasing over the past 30 years, especially in the 12-16 year age groups.

Signs and Symptoms

Crohn's Disease can present in a variety of ways, partly depending on the segment of the bowel most affected.

Common symptoms can include:

- ▶ abdominal pain
- ▶ diarrhoea
- ▶ weight loss and poor growth
- ▶ anorexia (poor appetite)
- ▶ lethargy (tiredness)
- ▶ possible delayed puberty
- ▶ mouth ulcers
- ▶ rectal bleeding



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Children with Crohn's Disease may also develop other inflammatory problems in other parts of their body such as arthritis of the joints, pyoderma in the skin, iritis of part of the eye and hidradenitis suppurativa of the sweat glands. The inflammation in the bowel may cause abscess and/or bowel strictures (narrowing). Sometimes a fistula (abnormal track) can occur either from the bowel to the skin, or from the bowel to another abdominal or pelvic organ, for example, to the bladder or vagina.



Investigations

Diagnosis can only be made after a series of investigations. These are also needed to accurately assess the nature and extent of any disease in order to commence appropriate management.

Diagnostic tests may include:

- ▶ plain abdominal x-ray
- ▶ barium meal
- ▶ endoscopic investigations and biopsies under general anaesthetic or sedation
- ▶ samples of blood, stool and urine for testing

Treatment

There are many symptoms of Crohn's Disease which are varied and can change over time. There may be periods of acute illness and times when your child is well. It is a very unpredictable disease and treatments are given to best manage the symptoms as they occur.

Nutrition

Most people with Crohn's Disease should eat a normal diet to maintain their normal growth and development. Some children may be advised to have a special diet with supplements to help reduce disease symptoms.

Medicines

Various drugs can be used and include:

1. 5 ASA (aminosalicylic acid)

A group of drugs used to reduce the frequency of flare-ups. It should therefore be taken regularly, even when the child is well.

2. Steroids

These are used to treat flare-ups, but they do not prevent them. Steroid treatment should never be stopped abruptly, even after surgery. The dose should always be tailed off gradually under the supervision of their doctor.

3. Immuno-suppressants

Similar to steroids, and used to reduce inflammation by suppressing the immune system. They do not have the same side effects as steroids but your child will be more susceptible to infections because of their suppressed immune system.

4. Antibiotics

An antibiotic is used to treat infections associated with bowel disease.



Surgical Treatment

Should the disease and its symptoms become difficult to control surgery may be considered. The surgical procedure advised will depend on the exact nature of the problem. For example, a piece of bowel may need to be removed because of severe inflammation, fistula formation or narrowing of the bowel.

Occasionally it may be necessary to create a temporary stoma (opening of bowel into the tummy wall). Many people never need an operation and the doctor will only advise it if it is really necessary.

Surgical treatment will be advised if:

- ▶ medical treatments fail to control disease
- ▶ medical treatments result in severe side effects

Potential Problems

The complications of Crohn's Disease can include a recurrence of any of the previously mentioned signs and symptoms.

