

At a Glance.....**Ulcerative Colitis****Chronic Illness and Travel****Spring Into Action****ULCERATIVE COLITIS**

Ulcerative Colitis is a serious, chronic inflammatory disease of the large intestine, as known as the 'colon', and characterized by ulceration and episodes of bloody diarrhea.

The cause of this disease is not known although there are many theories, the most popular being the body's immune system reacting to a viral or bacterial infection by causing ongoing inflammation in the intestinal wall. Ulcerative colitis is not *caused* by emotional distress or sensitivity to certain foods or food products, but these factors, as well as a family history of the disease along with stress, have been shown to trigger or aggravate symptoms in some individuals.

Inflammation of the colon causes the bowel to empty frequently, resulting in diarrhea. Tiny open sores, known as ulcers, form in places where the inflammation has killed the cells that line the colon. The ulcers can bleed and produce pus and mucus.

The most common symptoms of ulcerative colitis are abdominal cramps and bloody diarrhea. Other symptoms include straining to produce stool, repeated bouts of diarrhea alternating with constipation or symptom free intervals, rectal urgency, fever, nausea, vomiting, overall feeling of body discomfort (malaise), joint pains, night sweats, and loss of nutrients. About 50% of individuals with this disease suffer from severe symptoms such as frequent high fever, bloody diarrhea, nausea and severe abdominal cramps.

There are various tests to ascertain the presence of ulcerative colitis and include blood work, barium enema, stool samples, endoscopy (scope into the colon) and biopsy.

Treatment depends on the seriousness of the disease as ulcerative colitis can affect each individual differently. Most individuals are treated with medications however in severe or prolonged cases, an individual may require surgery to remove the diseased colon.

There is no cure for ulcerative colitis, other than surgery. Approximately 25-40% of individuals with this disease must eventually have their colons removed due to massive bleeding, severe illness or rupture of the colon. There are several variations

of surgery that may be performed, most of which may result in the patient having to wear a pouch to collect waste as the colon and rectum may have been removed.

Symptoms can be triggered by certain foods and are often controlled by avoiding the foods that are known to upset the intestine such as highly seasoned foods or milk sugar (lactose). Often patients who are suffering from ulcerative colitis have also become lactose intolerant or sensitive.

Individuals who endure persistent abdominal cramping should avoid foods with skins such as corn, peas, raw fruits and vegetables. It is recommended that individuals eat fruit and vegetables that have been skinned and cooked. Roughage should be avoided if diarrhea is present.

Each individual with ulcerative colitis will experience this disease differently and will therefore be treated differently. Individuals who are treated with medication for mild to moderate symptoms should not expect a cure but can expect to keep the disease under control if they adhere to their medication regimen, watch their diet and keep stress to a minimum.

Non-compliance with medical regimens can lead to progression of the disease to severe degrees. If left to progress untreated over an undetermined period of time, ulcerative colitis may eventually lead to an enlarged colon and could even result in colon cancer.

In spite of compliance, individuals will experience remission periods where the symptoms that can last for months or years will go away. However, symptoms usually return.

It is important to realize, as with any chronic illness, that taking medication as prescribed will only benefit you in the long run. Often patients stop taking their prescribed medication because they feel better or their symptoms have subsided. Often after a short period of relief, symptoms resurface and illness begins again. To avoid this rebound, alternating effect one should take medication as prescribed by their physician or specialist.

Don't let your illness control you when you can control your illness:

- ☞ take medication as prescribed and do not stop unless advised by your physician, even if symptoms diminish;
- ☞ ensure a healthy lifestyle, both physical and mental, by including regular exercise, periods of relaxation, knowledge of the disease, knowing what triggers your symptoms and creating a support system with family and friends.



TRAVELLING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS



A vacation for most people is a fun, exciting and relaxing adventure. For individuals suffering from a chronic illness, it can be an adventure in itself just trying to have fun. Whether business or pleasure, if your condition is stable and under control, with careful planning you can feel more confident about travelling and ensure a successful trip.

1. *Visit your doctor prior to going away.* Your physician will need to know where you are going to make specific recommendations. He/she may prescribe supplies of medication or potentially needed medication for the trip. A treatment plan for 'flare-ups' is beneficial and may include adjustment to medication dosage and diet modifications. You should carry a written summary of medical history, current medications and dosage. Wearing a medical bracelet may alert persons to your condition in an emergency.
2. *Have your medications properly labelled and stored.* When travelling, you should always carry your medications in the original container(s) providing your name and the correct name of the drug. Carry your medication with you, with an extra supply packed in your suitcase. If travelling outside Canada, a note from your physician may assist you with customs officials.
3. *Become bilingual.* If you are travelling to a foreign country, carry a dictionary of origin and learn a few words that you may need in case of emergency with respect to your illness. Write down the translation of a phrase that you may need and carry it in your wallet.
4. *Special travel arrangements.* With advance notification, you may be able to make special accommodations with respect to seating and meals while travelling. An aisle seat will allow you to move more frequently and have easy access to washrooms.
5. *Be prepared.* Carry an extra set of clothing, snacks and medication in case of delays. Keep medication handy so you can find them easily when you need to take them as prescribed by your physician. Carry a cellular phone if travelling long distances in the car as it may be useful and can help you relax knowing you can contact help if needed.
6. *Expect the unexpected.* Be prepared for other possible illnesses and pack basic medications such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen, antihistamines, decongestants, antibiotic ointment, antinausea medications, etc. Be aware of what you can and can not ingest along with your prescribed medication and how it may affect your regular medications. Be aware that not all over the counter drugs, especially in foreign countries, will list all ingredients on the label. If you have a known sensitivity, consult the pharmacist.
7. *Watch what you eat.* You should avoid foods that have the potential to be contaminated such as food from street vendors, raw vegetables, fruit that can not be peeled by you, unpasteurized milk products, soft cheese, dairy products not refrigerated, raw meat, sushi, tap water and ice. Look for boiled drinks, soup or bottled drinks.

If you take precautions and are well prepared, you should be able to relax and have an enjoyable time.

✧ SPRING INTO ACTION ✧



With warmer weather approaching and less ice and snow on the sidewalks and trails, this is the time to sidestep those excuses and get your body in motion. Activity and exercise do not have to be strenuous to gain positive results. Simply walking will improve the status of your health. Post heart attack victims exercise, so what's your excuse? Weigh the benefits of regular activity, and health risks of inactivity, and you decide how you want to spring into action with respect to your health:

Benefits of regular physical activity:

better health, improved fitness, better posture and balance, better self-esteem, weight control, stronger muscles and bones, feeling more energetic, relaxation, reduced stress, independent living;

Health risks as a result of inactivity:

premature death, heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, adult-onset diabetes, osteoporosis, depression.



Sources for Resources

- 'insights&answers', Vol. 1, Number 4
- Medical Disability Advisory, 4th Edition

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