

# Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Inflammatory bowel disease is chronic inflammation of the intestines, causing attacks of symptoms such as diarrhea, abdominal pain, and cramping. The two main types of inflammatory bowel disease are Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. The exact cause is unknown. Inflammatory bowel disease is not curable, but helpful treatments are available.

## What is inflammatory bowel disease?

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is a group of digestive diseases causing inflammation (irritation, tenderness) of the intestinal system. These diseases are fairly common in children, most often in teens, but they can occur at younger ages. IBD causes unpredictable attacks of disease, with symptoms including diarrhea, abdominal pain and cramping, and bleeding from the intestines.

The two main types of IBD are:

- *Ulcerative colitis*. Inflammation is found only in the lowest parts of the intestinal tract: the colon (large intestine) and rectum. The main symptoms are bloody bowel movements and diarrhea. Symptoms may continue for a prolonged period or may come and go in unpredictable attacks.
- *Crohn's disease*. Sometimes called "regional enteritis," Crohn's disease is inflammation anywhere in the intestinal tract, including the large and small intestines and the anus. The exact symptoms depend on where the inflammation is found.

Symptoms unrelated to the digestive system may occur, including fever, slow growth, and arthritis. These are more common with Crohn's disease but may also occur in ulcerative colitis. Unfortunately, there is no cure for IBD. However, treatments are available to reduce symptoms, prevent complications, and reduce the number of attacks.

## What does it look like?

Symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease vary. They most commonly begin after age 15 but can occur in younger children. Common symptoms and problems include:

*Ulcerative colitis:*

- Blood in bowel movements.
- Diarrhea, but some patients have constipation instead.
- Feeling like you have to have a bowel movement very frequently or urgently.

- Symptoms may develop gradually or suddenly.
- Symptoms last a long time without improving, often more than 2 weeks.
- Weight loss or slow growth.
- Arthritis, although this is more common in Crohn's disease.

*Crohn's disease:*

- Symptoms depend on what parts of the intestinal system are involved.
- Patient may have bloody diarrhea, as in ulcerative colitis.
- Stomach pains and cramping.
- Symptoms outside the intestinal system are more common, including fever, tiredness, "feeling sick."
  - Slow growth may be the first sign.
  - Ulcers (open sores) in the mouth.
  - Arthritis (swollen, painful joints).
  - Kidney stones/gallbladder stones.
- Other symptoms are possible.

## What causes IBD?

- The causes of IBD are unclear. Both genetic and environmental factors are probably involved. Abnormal immune system responses lead to inflammation in the intestinal system.
- IBD is *not* caused by emotional stress. However, stress does seem to affect how often attacks of IBD symptoms occur.

## What are some possible complications of IBD?

There are many possible complications of IBD. Getting regular medical care and following a healthy lifestyle can reduce your child's risk of complications.

- Constant inflammation and irritation can lead to complications affecting the intestines:
  - People with IBD, especially ulcerative colitis, are at increased long-term risk of colon cancer. This risk doesn't develop until the disease has been present for many years.
  - People with Crohn's disease are at risk for strictures (scarring, narrowing), fissures (open sores), or fistulas (abnormal connections between the intestines and other structures, such as the skin, anus, or vagina). These complications may require additional treatment or surgery.

- Other problems outside the intestines may occur, including anemia, vitamin deficiencies, weight loss/growth problems, and many others. These problems are sometimes the initial symptoms of IBD, or they may develop later.
- In adulthood, other complications may develop, including arthritis, bone loss, eye problems, and kidney and liver disease.

### What puts your child at risk of IBD?

- If you or someone else in your family has IBD, your child may be at higher risk.
- In the United States, the risk is higher for whites and African Americans, lower for Hispanics and Asians.
- Ulcerative colitis is slightly more common in males; Crohn's disease is slightly more common in females.

### Can IBD be prevented?

- There is no known way to prevent IBD.
- Good treatment, including medical follow-up and diet changes, can reduce the risk of complications.

### How is IBD treated?

- Unfortunately, there is no cure for IBD. Effective treatments can improve symptoms, reduce the number of attacks, and reduce the risk of complications.
- We will recommend a visit to a specialist in stomach and intestinal diseases (a gastroenterologist). This specialist has the expertise to diagnose your child's IBD and recommend the most effective treatments.
- *Diagnosis.* Various tests may be needed, including tests to determine whether your child has ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, or some other intestinal problem. Tests may include blood tests, endoscopy (using a special instrument like a telescope to examine the inside of the intestinal system), and x-rays.

- *Medications* are an important part of treatment for IBD. The drugs and doses chosen depend on how ill your child is. Common medications include:

- Sulfasalazine. A drug that can reduce inflammation of the colon (large intestine). It may also help to prevent repeat attacks. However, aspirin allergy can cause problems for patients using this drug.
- Steroids. Steroid drugs such as prednisone are very effective in reducing inflammation. They have various side effects, including interference with growth, the development of cataracts, and others. Your doctor will try to keep your child's steroid dose as low as possible.
- Immunosuppressant drugs (for example, azathioprine) may be helpful. These medications help the person's own immune system from doing damage.
- Antibiotics seem helpful in some people with IBD. They may work by killing bacteria in the intestines that contribute to inflammation.
- *Surgery* is avoided if possible. However, it is sometimes needed if IBD has caused irreparable damage to part of the intestine.
- *Diet.* Because IBD can interfere with absorption by the intestines, it's important to make sure your child gets adequate nutrition.
- *Emotional support* can help your child and family live with IBD. Visits with a social worker or family counselor or participating in an IBD support group can be helpful.

### When should I call your office?

Call your gastroenterologist or our office if any of the following occurs:

- Fever.
- Severe abdominal pain.
- Vomiting.
- Blood in bowel movements.