

# Ulcerative Colitis

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Ulcerative colitis is a condition in which a portion of the colon becomes inflamed. The colon is the area of the lower intestine that connects to the rectum, and serves as a storage area for digestive waste material prior to exiting the body via the anus. Ulcerative colitis usually effects the left portion of the colon, in a form called &lsquo;distal colitis&rsquo;; however it can affect the whole colon in a form called &lsquo;pancolitis&rsquo;,. A similar condition affecting the rectum is called ulcerative &lsquo;proctitis&rsquo;.

Symptoms of ulcerative colitis include diarrhea, abdominal pain, and sometimes bloody bowel movements. It is sometimes mistaken for another inflammatory condition that may affect the colon, known as Crohn&rsquo;s disease. Crohn&rsquo;s disease and ulcerative colitis differ in several key ways. Firstly, ulcerative colitis only affects the colon, whereas Crohn&rsquo;s disease may involve any area of the gastrointestinal tract, including the small intestine. Ulcerative colitis only affects the outermost layers of epithelial cells along the colon, and Crohn&rsquo;s disease usually permeates into the deepest layers. Ulcerative colitis is always continuous, usually beginning with the rectum and involving a portion of the left colon without any unaffected areas in between. Crohn&rsquo;s disease often occurs in patches of the gastrointestinal tract, rather than in a continuous manner.

Although separate conditions, ulcerative colitis and Crohn&rsquo;s disease are often lumped together under the umbrella term Inflammatory Bowel Disease, or IBD. IBD is different from another lower intestinal condition known as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). IBS is a condition involving spasms in the muscles associated with the bowels, and is not an inflammation of tissue. IBS is therefore a much less serious condition.

Ulcerative colitis is most prevalent in the young, and is especially common to people of a Jewish ethnic background. It is found in women and men equally, and it&rsquo;s estimated to affect at least half a million people in the United States. Crohn&rsquo;s disease is estimated to affect about as many.

What causes ulcerative colitis is not understood. Some of the most recent theories suggest that a hard to detect infectious agent may be responsible, for the inflammation itself is a kind of immune response. Diagnosis is usually done by way of a colonoscopy, and a resulting biopsy of the suspected tissue.

Treatment for the condition usually consists of anti-inflammatory medications, and in more severe cases corticosteroids and immunosuppressive drugs may be required to induce a state of remission. There is a small chance the affected tissues may become malignant, which may require a removal of part of the colon.

Ulcerative colitis can be extremely unpleasant to live with, but is rarely fatal on its own. Once remission is achieved, it can usually be sustained by use of relatively mild medication, and a healthy diet.