

# Crohn's disease: What is it, and how can it be treated?

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Crohn's disease can turn your life into a gastrointestinal nightmare, but

there is hope.

According to the [National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases](#) (NIDDK), more than half a million Americans have Crohn's [disease](#), which has become more common in the United States in recent years. While there is no cure for the condition, there are treatments that can help ease its symptoms.

Here, experts will discuss those symptoms, how Crohn's disease develops and its different therapies. They'll also talk about the best Crohn's disease diet, and which foods to avoid.

## What is Crohn's disease?

"Crohn's disease is an [inflammatory bowel disease](#) that causes chronic inflammation of the GI tract," Mayo Clinic gastroenterologist [Dr. Bill Faubion](#) explained recently in a [video](#).

According to the NIDDK, the condition may affect any part of your digestive tract, including your mouth, esophagus, small intestine, large intestine and rectum.

## What causes Crohn's disease?

While the exact causes of Crohn's disease are unknown, the NIDDK notes that several factors may lead to its development, including:

- An autoimmune reaction caused by digestive tract bacteria
- Genetics, particularly if you have a sibling or parent with the condition
- A history of smoking, which may double your risk
- A high-fat diet

- Taking nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

## Crohn's disease symptoms

Even though both men and women experience the [common symptoms](#) of Crohn's disease—like diarrhea, [stomach pain](#), [weight loss](#) and blood in the stool—[Temple Health](#) notes that certain symptoms can show up more in one sex than the other.

Crohn's disease symptoms in females include:

- Anemia
- Osteoporosis and bone loss
- Menstrual pain
- Potential increase in pregnancy complications

Crohn's disease symptoms in males include:

- Decrease in sexual desire
- Erectile dysfunction
- Higher risk for colorectal cancer
- Higher risk for primary [sclerosing cholangitis](#), a rare liver disease

## Crohn's disease diagnosis

"Crohn's disease can affect any area of the GI tract, but it's mostly found in the large and small intestine," Faubion explained.

According to [NIDDK](#), Crohn's disease symptoms tests include looking for:

- Bloating, pain or inflammation of the abdomen
- Enlargement of the liver or spleen

There are also lab tests used to help diagnose the condition, including:

- White blood cell tests for signs of inflammation
- Red blood cell tests for anemia
- Stool tests to rule out other digestive problems

Your doctor may also order different endoscopies that use flexible tubes with attached cameras to explore your GI tract, such as:

- Upper GI tract endoscopy to examine your esophagus, stomach and duodenum
- Enteroscopy to examine your small intestine
- Colonoscopy to examine your ileum, colon and rectum

More detailed Crohn's disease symptoms tests include:

- Upper GI series
- CT scans

### **Can a specific diet help with symptoms?**

The [Crohn's and Colitis Foundation](#) says research suggests that certain foods and drinks may aggravate Crohn's disease symptoms, such as:

- Alcohol
- Caffeinated drinks
- Sugars and artificial sweeteners
- High-lactose foods
- Fiber-rich foods
- High-fat, processed and spicy foods
- Red meat
- Coconut and palm oils

"While it's a normal response to restrict foods when you're experiencing symptoms, we don't want to normalize restriction," registered dietician [Brittany Rogers](#), of the National Scientific Advisory Committee for the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation, said recently in a [video](#). "Focus on variety, not restriction. Current [Crohn's disease] guidelines include increased consumption of fruits, vegetables and foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids."

These foods include:

- Leafy greens
- Sweet potatoes
- Potatoes
- Rice
- Oatmeal
- Bananas
- Applesauce
- Raspberries
- Fatty fish
- Chia seeds
- Flaxseed oil and meal

## **Crohn's disease treatment**

According to the NIDDK, [Crohn's disease therapy](#) often includes medications and surgery, along with diet and lifestyle changes.

## **Crohn's disease medication**

Medications used to treat Crohn's disease include:

- Immunomodulators to reduce [immune system](#) activity
- Biologics to reduce proteins made by the immune system that

cause inflammation

- Aminosalicylates to reduce inflammation
- Corticosteroids to reduce inflammation and immune system activity
- Loperamide for diarrhea
- Acetaminophen for pain

## **Crohn's disease surgery**

Surgeries for Crohn's disease include:

- Small bowel resection to remove part of the small intestine
- Large bowel resection to remove part of the colon
- Proctocolectomy and ileostomy to remove the entire colon and rectum and attach the end of the [small intestine](#) to an opening outside the abdomen

## **Crohn's disease self-care**

"Although there's no firm evidence that any particular foods cause Crohn's disease, a food diary can help you identify personal triggers," advised Faubion.

In addition, he noted that "it's important to take care of your mental health, too. Find ways to manage stress, like exercise, breathing, relaxation techniques or biofeedback."

The NIDDK says that resting your bowels periodically can also help reduce Crohn's symptoms. Liquid nutrients recommended by your doctor can be taken for a few days or weeks to help with this.

## **Living with Crohn's disease**

"Learn as much as you can about Crohn's. Staying informed can help a lot," Faubion said.

"Your doctor can work with you to find therapies that alleviate your symptoms," he added. "While there is no cure, once you've been diagnosed, treatment can help you get back to a more normal and comfortable life."

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