

# Living with Colitis

## Treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms

by Jean Jeffers, Staff Writer

The worst has happened. You are having daily bouts of diarrhea, abdominal pain and cramps. You have just been diagnosed with colitis.

Most individuals suffering from colitis have asked the same questions: What is colitis? How is it managed? Can it be cured? Most pressing of all: Will I be able to lead a normal life?

"Colitis is a disease that affects the large intestine (the colon) and the rectum," said Dr. Richard Desi, gastroenterologist with the Institute for Digestive Health and Liver Disease at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Md. It causes inflammation of the colon's lining

and the rectal wall. The lining and the rectal wall become red, swollen and ulcerated.

A diagnosis of colitis is made by examining the patient's history, performing lab work and doing a colonoscopy. There are different types of colitis, Desi said, including infectious and ulcerative colitis. Symptoms of ulcerative include cramping, abdominal pain and diarrhea. Some individuals with colitis also have poor appetite, fatigue and anemia. Still others have joint pain with redness and swelling and liver problems. Complications of ulcerative colitis can include:

- narrowed areas of the intestine (strictures), making it hard to pass stool;
- increased risk of cancer of the colon and rectum;

- complications outside the digestive tract;
- irritable bowel syndrome; and
- the swelling of the colon to many times its normal size. This condition, called toxic megacolon, is rare but needs immediate treatment.

Desi said colitis may be caused by an autoimmune disease. This means the body could be attacking its own healthy organs and tissues. While stress and certain foods do not cause colitis, they may exacerbate symptoms.

Treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms and promoting healing of damaged tissues. Mild to moderate colitis is treated with Mesalazine, which relieves inflammation and helps the disease go into remission. Sometimes corticosteroids are used. For severe cases, stronger treatment is indicated, using medicines that suppress the immune system, such as Humira.

A small group of individuals are

affected by colitis on a continual basis. They have constant diarrhea and must watch to make sure they get sufficient fluids, be vigilant about taking their medications, and of course for these persons, staying close to a bathroom is essential.

Some people with colitis find coffee or caffeine exacerbates their symptoms. Others complain of problems with raw vegetables or high-fiber foods.

"It is important to self-manage ulcerative colitis with a healthy lifestyle and a nutrient-rich diet," Desi said. "Eating a diet that is high in protein, complex carbohydrates, whole grains and good fats is indicated."

Desi said it is possible to lead a normal life with colitis. The aim, he says, is to control inflammation. The problems arise when patients, for their own reasons, go off their medications. Then the illness flares up.

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