

## **Diverticulitis/Diverticulosis**

### **What is diverticulosis?**

“**Diverticulosis**” is a term that refers to having “pockets” in the colon, and it is a common condition in North America. These pockets form in the colon as patients get older. More than 50% of Americans have this condition by age 65, and almost all Americans have it by age 80. These pockets, or diverticula, cannot turn into cancer and do not cause problems in the majority of patients who have them.

### **What are the symptoms of diverticulosis?**

In most patients, diverticulosis causes no symptoms. The major cause of diverticulosis is increased pressure in the colon, which results when there is not enough fiber in the diet. This can cause the colon muscle to cramp or spasm, which pushes out the pockets. These muscle spasms may cause cramping pain in the left lower abdomen in some patients.

In a small percentage of patients, complications of diverticulosis can occur. Complications of diverticulosis include diverticulitis and gastrointestinal bleeding. For these patients, hospitalization and/or surgery may be necessary.

### **What is diverticulitis?**

“**Diverticulitis**” is a potential complication of diverticulosis, and refers to inflammation or infection of one of the “pockets.” This occurs when a small hole develops in a pocket, releasing a small amount of infection into the surrounding tissues. The cause of this is not known. Patients with diverticulitis usually feel ill, along with serious abdominal pain and fever. Mild cases can usually be treated with bowel rest and antibiotics. Severe cases can cause abscesses to develop in the abdomen, which often need to be drained. Very sick patients may even require urgent surgery.

Complications of diverticulitis can include complete colon perforations, fistulas (tunnels to the bladder or vagina), and narrowing or blockage of the intestine. Surgery is almost always required in these serious cases.

Bleeding typically does not occur with diverticulitis, but can occur from one of the non-inflamed pockets (diverticulosis). Most bleeding from diverticulosis stops on its own, but blood transfusions and surgery are sometimes required.

## **Diverticulosis/Diverticulitis Continued...**

### **If I have been diagnosed with diverticulosis, do I need a specific diet?**

In the past, patients with colon pockets were placed on a special diet in the mistaken belief that this would help prevent complications of the pockets. We now know that it is okay to eat seeds, nuts, tomatoes, strawberries, popcorn, etc., and that this will not increase the likelihood of developing complications of diverticulosis. This is true even in patients who have had a previous episode of diverticulitis or bleeding.

Colon pockets are caused by increased pressure in the colon due to low dietary fiber. A diet high in fiber will help reduce this pressure, which means pockets will be less likely to form and complications will be less likely to occur. Dietary fiber is found in unprocessed grains such as bran, and is not found in sufficient quantities in vegetables such as peas and carrots. Therefore, your doctor will likely recommend starting a fiber supplement such as Metamucil, Citrucel, or Fibercon (calcium polycarbophil).

### **Is there anything I can do to help prevent future problems with my diverticulosis?**

Once pockets have developed in the colon there is no guaranteed way to prevent future complications. However, increasing dietary fiber and taking a fiber supplement is the best way to help reduce the likelihood of future problems. In those patients who are having repeated cases of diverticulitis or bleeding, surgery to remove the affected part of the colon is usually recommended.