

Crohn's disease:

A chronic inflammation of the bowel leading to aphthous ulcers. It may affect any portion of the GI tract. One member of a group of gastrointestinal disease called Inflammatory Bowel Diseases.

What Is the Treatment for Crohn's Disease?

Treatment for Crohn's disease depends on the location and severity of disease, complications, and response to previous treatment. The goals of treatment are to control inflammation, correct nutritional deficiencies, and relieve Crohn's disease symptoms like abdominal pain, diarrhea, and rectal bleeding. Treatment may include drugs, nutrition supplements, surgery, or a combination of these options. At this time, treatment can help control the disease, but there is no cure.

Some people have long periods of remission, sometimes years, when they are free of Crohn's disease symptoms. However, the disease usually recurs at various times over a person's lifetime. This changing pattern of the disease means one cannot always tell when a treatment has helped. Predicting when a remission may occur or when symptoms of Crohn's disease will return is not possible.

Someone with Crohn's disease may need medical care for a long time, with regular doctor visits to monitor the condition.

Drug Therapy

Most people are first treated with drugs containing mesalamine, a substance that helps control inflammation. Sulfasalazine is the most commonly used of these drugs. Patients who do not benefit from it or who cannot tolerate it may be put on other mesalamine-containing drugs, generally known as 5-ASA agents, such as Asacol, Dipentum, or Pentasa. Possible side effects of mesalamine preparations include nausea, vomiting, heartburn, diarrhea, and headache.

Some patients take corticosteroids to control inflammation. These drugs are the most effective for active Crohn's disease, but they can cause serious side effects, including greater susceptibility to infection.

Drugs that suppress the immune system are also used to treat Crohn's disease. Most commonly prescribed are 6-mercaptopurine and a related drug, azathioprine. Immunosuppressive agents work by blocking the immune reaction that contributes to inflammation. These drugs may cause side effects like nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea and may lower a person's resistance to infection. When patients are treated with a combination of corticosteroids and immunosuppressive drugs, the dose of corticosteroids can eventually be lowered. Some studies suggest that immunosuppressive drugs may enhance the effectiveness of corticosteroids.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved the drug infliximab (brand name, Remicade) for the treatment of moderate to severe Crohn's disease that does not respond

to standard therapies (mesalamine substances, corticosteroids, immunosuppressive agents) and for the treatment of open, draining fistulas. Infliximab, the first treatment approved specifically for Crohn's disease, is an anti-tumor necrosis factor (TNF) substance. TNF is a protein produced by the immune system that may cause the inflammation associated with Crohn's disease. Anti-TNF removes TNF from the bloodstream before it reaches the intestines, thereby preventing inflammation. Investigators will continue to study patients taking infliximab to determine its long-term safety and efficacy.

Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial overgrowth in the small intestine caused by stricture, fistulas, or prior surgery. For this common problem, the doctor may prescribe one or more of the following antibiotics: ampicillin, sulfonamide, cephalosporin, tetracycline, or metronidazole.

Diarrhea and crampy abdominal pain are often relieved when the inflammation subsides, but additional medication may also be necessary. Several antidiarrheal agents could be used, including diphenoxylate, loperamide, and codeine. Patients who are dehydrated because of diarrhea will be treated with fluids and electrolytes.

Can Diet Control Crohn's Disease?

No special diet has been proven effective for preventing or treating this disease. Some people find their symptoms of Crohn's disease are made worse by milk, alcohol, hot spices, or fiber. People are encouraged to follow a nutritious diet and avoid any foods that seem to worsen symptoms of Crohn's disease. But there are no consistent rules