

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

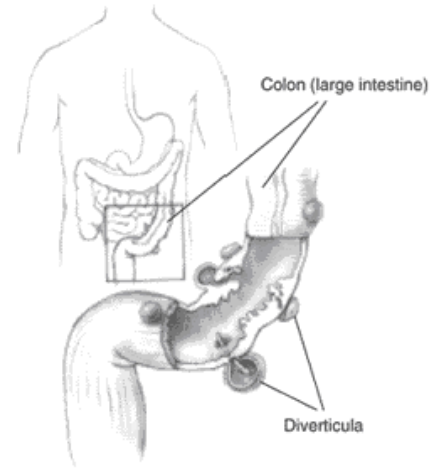
Title: Acute diverticulitis: are antibiotics necessary?

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Plain Language Summary:

What is diverticulitis?

Diverticula are small sacs or pouches that bulge out from the lining of the digestive tract, especially the large intestine. If you have these sacs, you have diverticulosis. This condition is common in older people, especially people over the age of 60. About half of everyone over the age of 60 has diverticulosis. If these sacs become irritated or inflamed it is called diverticulitis.



What causes diverticulitis?

No one knows for sure why some people get these sacs in their large intestine. One idea is that people who eat less fiber in their diet have a higher chance of having them. Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that your body does not digest. Also, doctors do not know why these sacs sometimes become inflamed. About 10-25% of people with diverticulosis will get diverticulitis.

How do I know if I have diverticulosis or diverticulitis?

Most people who have these pouches do not have any symptoms. Sometimes it can cause minimal cramping, bloating, or constipation. Many times people find out that they have diverticulosis only after they have a colonoscopy (a test used to screen for colon cancer in people over the age of 50). When the pouches become inflamed, the most common symptoms are abdominal pain on the left side, fever, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or constipation. If you have these symptoms, you should see your doctor.

How should it be treated?

If you find out that you have diverticulosis after a colonoscopy, your doctor may recommend that you increase the amount of fiber in your diet. This may help with any symptoms you may have, such as bloating or cramping. It may also help prevent you from getting diverticulitis.

If you develop diverticulitis, your treatment will depend on how severe your symptoms are. If you have mild symptoms, you may be able to be treated at home. Your doctor will probably recommend a bland diet of only liquids, pain medications, and antibiotics. If your symptoms are more severe, you may need to be hospitalized. At the hospital, you will likely receive antibiotics through an IV. In some very severe cases, surgery is needed to remove the part of the digestive tract that is inflamed.

Scientists are studying whether or not diverticulitis should be treated with antibiotics. For many people with mild symptoms, antibiotics may not be necessary. As scientists learn more about this condition, the way it is treated may change.

Where can I find more information?

Medline Plus:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/diverticulosisanddiverticulitis.html>

American College of Gastroenterology

<http://patients.gi.org/topics/diverticulosis-and-diverticulitis/>

Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/print/diverticulitis/DS00070/DSECTION=all&METHOD=print>

Key Words:

Diverticulitis

Diverticulosis

Abdominal CT

Colonoscopy

Diverticular disease

This document was created by a medical student enrolled in the Family Medicine Clerkship at the University of Minnesota Medical School as part of the course project. The aim of the project is to present information on a medical topic in the format of a patient education handout. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Minnesota Medical School physicians and faculty. These materials are provided for informational purposes only and are in no way intended to take the place of the advice and recommendations of your personal health care provider. The information provided may no longer be up-to-date since it has not been reviewed since the date of creation. The information provided should not be used to diagnose a health problem or disease, or as a means of determining treatment. In the event of a medical emergency, immediately contact a doctor or call 911.