Crohn's Disease

Crohn's disease is a long-term (*chronic*) soreness and redness (*inflammation*) of the intestines (*bowel*). It can affect any portion of the digestive tract, from the mouth to the anus. It can also cause problems outside the digestive tract. Crohn's disease is closely related to a disease called Ulcerative Colitis (together, these two diseases are called Inflammatory Bowel Disease).

CAUSES

The cause of Crohn's disease is not known. One theory is that, in an easily affected (*susceptible*) person, the immune system is triggered to attack the body's own digestive tissue. Crohn's disease runs in families. It seems to be more common in certain geographic areas and amongst certain races. There are no clear-cut dietary causes.

SYMPTOMS:

Crohn's disease can cause many different symptoms since it can affect many different parts of the body. Symptoms include:

- Fatigue.
- Weight loss.
- Chronic diarrhea, sometime bloody.
- Abdominal pain and cramps.
- Fever.
- Ulcers or canker sores in the mouth or rectum.
- Anemia (low red blood cells).
- Arthritis, skin problems, and eye problems may occur.

Complications of Crohn's disease can include:

- Series of holes (*perforation*) of the bowel.
- Portions of the intestines sticking to each other (*adhesions*).
- Obstruction of the bowel.
- Fistula formation, typically in the rectal area but also in other areas. A fistula is an opening between the bowels and the outside, or between the bowels and another organ.
- A painful crack in the mucous membrane of the anus (*rectal fissure*).

DIAGNOSIS:

Your caregiver may suspect Crohn's disease based on your symptoms and an exam. Blood tests may confirm that there is a problem. You may be asked to submit a stool specimen for examination. X-rays and CT scans may be necessary. Ultimately, the diagnosis is usually made after a procedure that uses a flexible tube that is inserted via your mouth or your anus. This is done under sedation and is called either an upper endoscopy or colonoscopy. With these tests, the specialist can take tiny tissue samples and remove them from the inside of the bowel (*biopsy*). Examination of this biopsy tissue under a microscope can reveal Crohn's disease as the cause of your symptoms.

Due to the many different forms that Crohn's disease can take, symptoms may be present for several years before a diagnosis is made.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- There is no cure for Crohn's disease. The best treatment is frequent checkups with your caregiver.
- Symptoms such as diarrhea can be controlled with medications. Avoid foods that have a laxative effect such as fresh fruit, vegetables and dairy products. During flare ups, you can rest your bowel by refraining from solid foods. Drink clear liquids frequently during the day (electrolyte or re-hydrating fluids are best. Your caregiver can help you with suggestions). Drink often to prevent loss of body fluids (*dehydration*). When diarrhea has cleared, eat small meals and more frequently. Avoid food additives and stimulants such as

caffeine (coffee, tea, or chocolate). Enzyme supplements may help if you develop intolerance to a sugar in dairy products (*lactose*). Ask your caregiver or dietitian about specific dietary instructions.

- Try to maintain a positive attitude. Learn relaxation techniques such as self hypnosis, mental imaging, and muscle relaxation.
- If possible, avoid stresses which can aggravate your condition.
- Exercise regularly.
- Follow your diet.
- Always get plenty of rest.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your symptoms fail to improve after a week or two of new treatment.
- You experience continued weight loss.
- You have ongoing crampy digestion or loose bowels.
- You develop a new skin rash, skin sores, or eye problems.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have worsening of your symptoms or develop new symptoms.
- An unexplained oral temperature above 102° F (38.9° C) develops, and is not controlled by medication.
- You develop bloody diarrhea.
- You develop severe abdominal pain.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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