

## Condition:



# Crohn's Disease

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## What is Crohn's Disease?

Crohn's Disease, along with Ulcerative Colitis, is one of the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) that affects more than 300,000 people in the UK. They are chronic (ongoing and lifelong) conditions and symptoms will vary from person to person and range from mild to severe.

## Crohn's Disease and Work

Crohn's can create certain challenges in the work environment. When a flare up strikes you may need to use the toilet immediately, no matter what task you are in the middle of doing.

Your productivity may also be affected due to other symptoms caused by Crohn's disease, such as fatigue and arthritis. Managing your daily work schedule can be very stressful and exhausting.

## Top tips to help manage your Crohn's in the workplace

There are ways to keep on top of your Crohn's disease, at work. Here are some tips to help you:

- Stick to your mealtimes and medication schedule. You could keep any medication by your desk in case you need the toilet.
- Although it is understandable that you would try and keep this to yourself at work, it is much easier to tell people at work. Your co-workers will have likely noticed that you have been making frequent trips to the toilet, and that you may have had frequent absences from work.
- Colleagues and co-workers can be much more understanding if they are aware of what is going on, and will likely value your honesty.
- It is also important to inform your supervisor or line manager as they may be able to help by making reasonable adjustments to your workload, or enabling you to work in close proximity to the toilet, or even allowing you to spend time working at home.

## What causes Crohn's Disease?

At least 115,000 people have Crohn's disease in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Up to one third are young – less than 21 years old – when diagnosed with Crohn's disease you are likely to experience symptoms, such as diarrhea, abdominal pain and tiredness, which result from inflammation in your gut. However, it is not clear what triggers this inflammation.

## Symptoms

### Physical symptoms

**Diarrhoea:** Sometimes mixed with blood, mucus and pus.

**Cramping pains in the abdomen:** These can be Vary in severity and be incredibly severe. Often occur before passing a stool.

**Tiredness and fatigue:** This can be due to the illness itself, from anaemia (see below) from the side effects of some of the drugs used for irritable bowel, or from a lack of sleep if you have to keep getting up at night with pain or diarrhoea.

**Feeling generally unwell:** Some people may feel feverish.

**Loss of appetite and weight:** Weight loss can be due to the body not absorbing nutrients from food because of the inflammation in the gut.

**Anaemia (a reduced number of red blood cells):** You are more likely to develop anaemia if you are losing a lot of blood and are not eating much.

**Mouth ulcers:** You may go on to develop further complications such as:

**Strictures:** This is when there is ongoing inflammation and then healing in the bowel which may cause scar tissue to form. This can create a narrow section of the bowel, called a stricture.

**Fistulas:** A fistula is an abnormal channel or passageway connecting one internal organ to another, or to the outside surface of your body. You are likely to experience this if you have Crohn's Disease.

### Social symptoms

Social anxieties, especially around needing the toilet in public places, causing reluctance to engage in social activities.

Social isolation due to not knowing where to turn or how to talk about their condition.

### Psychological symptoms

Loss of self-esteem.

Embarrassment.

Low mood and lack of confidence in engaging with tasks, due to condition.

## Talking to your GP or another healthcare provider about your Crohn's Disease

It can be difficult to approach your GP about Crohn's Disease. However, talking to your healthcare team, including your GP, is essential to help manage your condition. Some tips include bringing someone you feel comfortable with you to your appointment, keeping track of your symptoms so that your GP will know how it affects you, and also working with your GP with regards to treatment goals.

Because everyone has a different experience Crohn's Disease is difficult to diagnose. You are likely to show symptoms of unexplained weight loss, stomach pains and cramping, and blood in their stool, prior to diagnosis.

Diagnosis is carried out by conducting a series of tests, carried out by the gastroenterologist. Because it is an ongoing condition you will likely need to repeat many of these tests.

Doctors are likely to use the same tests to diagnose Ulcerative Colitis, even though they affect different parts of the digestive tract.

- **Blood tests** can show whether your liver and kidneys are functioning properly and that you are taking in the right amount of vitamins and minerals.
- **Stools tested** for signs of bleeding and inflammation. If inflammation is discovered then an endoscopy, scan or x ray may be carried out on you.
- **Endoscopy** - this is a type of test that allows the specialist doctor or nurse to look directly at the inside of your digestive system using an endoscope (long thin tube with camera on the end). There are also capsule endoscopies, which, after swallowing, will take photos of your digestive system.
- **Colonoscopy** or sigmoidoscopy is used to look at your colon. A sigmoidoscope (a short endoscope) or a colonoscope (a longer and more flexible endoscope) will be inserted through the anus (back passage) to examine your rectum and colon.

# Recommended Treatments for Crohn's disease

Treatment is dependent on the severity of your symptoms.

## Drug treatment

Treatment goals are usually:

- Controlling your inflammation/Immune response to tissue injury that causes redness, swelling, and pain, that triggers your symptoms
- Achieving remission
- Maintaining remission

The drugs you are likely to take are anti-inflammatory drugs and include: Adalimumab, Aminosaliclates (5-ASAs), Azathioprine and Mercaptopurine, Azathioprine – for Young People, Biologic Drugs - Golimumab, Infliximab, Methotrexate, Steroids, Vedolizumab.

## Surgery

The most common reasons you are likely to need surgery are:

- Poor response to drugs/ nutritional treatment.
- Scarring of your intestine, this leads to a stricture (narrowing of the intestine).
- Abscesses of your fistula caused by spreading of inflammation in your bowel.
- Emergencies, such as bleeding of your bowel.
- Cancer- there is a higher risk of bowel cancer if you have had Crohn's for around 8-10 years (Crohn's and Colitis UK Information Sheet).

## Emotional support

**Crohn's and Colitis Support** is a listening service if you need a safe place to talk about living with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). It's provided by volunteers, all who have a personal experience of IBD. They are trained to provide emotional support for you. The telephone number is 0121 737 9931.

## Some techniques to manage your Crohn's disease:



### Take Notice

Mindfulness can help you to manage your stress levels and reduce symptoms.



### Be Active

Learn exercises that help you improve your control. Exercising regularly can help you relieve stress and may also promote good digestion.



### Connect

Become a member of Crohn's and Colitis UK.

Local networks- join in any local support groups to help alleviate isolation.

Attend GM and invitations to events from Crohn's and Colitis UK.



### Eat Healthy

Eat a healthy balanced diet and keep a food diary. This can help you monitor whether certain foods are aggravating the condition. Eat little and often. This approach is helpful when a larger meal is not possible due to a flare up.



### Keep Learning

Subscribe to Connect Magazine, which provides up to date research.



### Regular blood tests

To identify whether you have any vitamin/ mineral deficiencies.



## Carry a 'can't wait card'

(provided when becoming a member) and radar key for when the toilet is needed while out and about (also provided with membership).

## Useful links

## Emotional helpline

Crohn's and Colitis  
Support

**0121 737 9931**

**(1:00pm-3:30pm Tuesday  
to Thursday, and 6:30pm-  
9:00pm, Monday to Friday,  
except English bank holidays)**

## Summary

Crohn's Disease is a condition that ranges in severity and can have far reaching effects beyond just the physical symptoms. However, with support and regular treatment the symptoms can be alleviated and made more manageable. It is important for the person with Crohn's Disease, or any other bowel disease, to engage in support services and treatment to help reduce the isolating and painful effects of the condition.