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GREG S. COHEN, MD

ASK YOUR DOCTOR

GASTROENTEROLOGIST GREG S. COHEN ANSWERS COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT IBD

By Rachel Reiff Ellis

Reviewed by Melinda Ratini, DO, MS, WebMD Medical Reviewer

Before your visit with your doctor, it's good to think through what you need to know to best manage your disease. These questions will help you start a dialogue.

Q. What's causing my inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) symptoms?

In IBD, the immune system mounts an inappropriately high level of inflammation in your gastrointestinal [GI] tract. This inflammation can cause diarrhea, nausea, abdominal pain, and fatigue.

"This is very similar to rashes like eczema and psoriasis," says Greg S. Cohen, MD, a gastroenterologist and clinical associate professor of medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago. "In some ways it is fair to say that having IBD is like having a rash inside your GI tract."

Q. Why is it important to get my inflammation under control?

Although doctors have made great strides in treating IBD and developing new highly targeted medications, there still is no cure. But even though it's a lifelong condition, you can effectively manage it with ongoing treatment.

Cohen says finding an IBD treatment that works is key, both for symptom control and for prevention of long-term complications.

"Controlling the inflammation will control the symptoms of IBD and allow you to return to a normal life," he says. In addition, chronic inflammation can increase your risk of GI tract cancer. When your inflammation is in check, this risk goes down.

Q. Do I need to make changes to my diet?

No specific diet has been shown to prevent or treat IBD. However, Cohen says the evidence shows that a healthy diet low in animal fats such as the Mediterranean diet is the best dietary strategy to reduce inflammation. But it's not a replacement for medication.

"[A low-inflammation diet] does not come close to the effect that medications produce on controlling the inflammation," he says. "In general, I find that when patients are on heavily restricted diets in an effort to control their symptoms, it is an indication that they are using their diet as a crutch and that there are unresolved issues with their IBD that need to be addressed more effectively with medications."

Talk to your doctor about how your diet can—and can't—support IBD management.

Q. What symptoms do you need to know about right away?

Fevers, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, or worsening diarrhea with blood in the stool should all be brought to your doctor's attention, Cohen says. Be sure you know the best ways to get in touch with your doctor should you experience any of these.

"The most important thing for a new IBD patient to have is a doctor they feel comfortable with," Cohen says. "The key to effectively managing this condition and learning about it is to have a doctor that is easy to communicate with and able to answer questions in a timely manner."