

News to Digest

Health tips from your Gastroenterologist...



Center for
**Digestive
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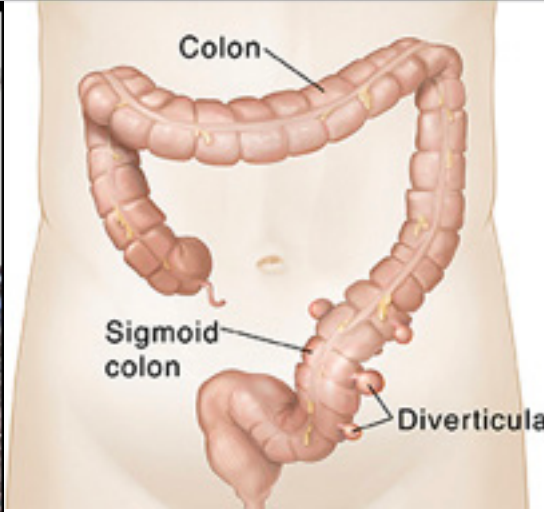
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Say “NUTS” to Diverticulosis Robert Fusco, MD

What is diverticulosis?

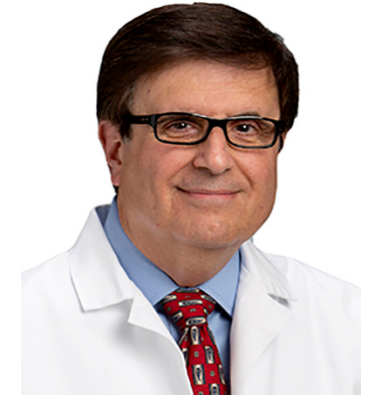
Diverticulosis is a condition rather than a disease. It affects the large intestine, or colon. The inner wall of a normal colon is strong, and the inner surface is relatively smooth. A colon affected by diverticulosis has weak spots in the wall that bulge outward - much like a hollow bubble forming on a worn inner tube. The openings of these out-pouches, or “pockets,” can readily be seen during a colonoscopy exam.



A single pocket is called a *diverticula* and the presence of these pockets on the colon is termed *diverticulosis*. In medicine, the suffix “_itis” refers to inflammation. When these pouches are inflamed or infected, it is called *diverticulitis*. Diverticulitis results in greater than 200,000 U.S. hospitalizations at a cost of more than 2 billion dollars per year. In recent years, diverticulitis has been increasing in frequency, particularly among younger individuals³. When it occurs in younger individuals, it is usually a more aggressive problem. When diverticula begin to hemorrhage, that is not an infection, but rather simply, *bleeding diverticulosis*

Who gets diverticulosis?

Diverticulosis is a common condition affecting both men and women. Since diverticulosis takes so long to develop, it usually appears later in life. It affects over 50 percent of those over age 60. Diverticulosis is reported in >70% of colonoscopies in patients over 80 years old.



Robert Fusco, MD

March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month

Most individuals do not know that colon cancer is now the NUMBER ONE cancer killer in the United States (in non-smokers). Aside from lung cancer, colon cancer kills more Americans than breast cancer, prostate cancer, etc. What makes this even sadder is that colon cancer is also probably one of the most preventable of all cancers. This is because most cases begin as a small non-cancerous polyp within the colon. There are no warning symptoms, but screening colonoscopy can find and remove polyps before they turn to cancer... GET SCREENED

MARCH IS

**National
Colorectal Cancer
Awareness Month**

Over 50?
Family History?
Get Screened!

Visit www.screen4coloncancer.org to learn more.

Avoiding seeds, nuts, corn

Even before I entered medical school in 1969, doctors have been advising their patients with diverticulosis to change their diet in two ways:

1. Consume more dietary fiber
2. Avoid foods with seeds, nuts, corn, and popcorn

For years, doctors have known that there was reasonably good evidence to support the first recommendation. Population studies have shown that a high-fiber diet is helpful.

However, doctors have also known that no scientific studies had been done to prove that avoiding seeds, nuts, and corn was helpful. This suggestion was based on the supposed notion that foods containing seeds, nuts, or popcorn could become lodged in the hollow diverticular pockets and cause irritation. This irritation might lead to a full-blown case of infection, or diverticulitis. It was just good “common sense” and for decades millions of patients with diverticulosis have been told to avoid these foods. In the past, I had given that advice to many.

Turning that diet upside down

Well, finally, someone has taken the time and effort to set the record straight, and this new research has turned this advice upside down. Since 1986, medical researchers at the University of Washington and Harvard Medical School have been studying the diet and health of over 47,000 professional men. After over two decades of follow-up, they reported their findings at Digestive Disease Week, an annual international conference of gastroenterologists that I recently attended. **Surprisingly, their research found that men who frequently ate popcorn, corn, seeds, or nuts had a 28% DECREASE in the risk of diverticulitis and bleeding diverticulosis compared to those who avoided these foods. This is precisely the opposite of what was expected.**

Eat more fiber

I believe this advice is still sound. Most health experts agree that the lack of fiber and bulk in the diet is the primary cause of chronic constipation and diverticular disease in American adults. As our foods are becoming more highly refined, more of us are suffering from

symptoms of diverticular disease. Once diverticula have formed, there is no way to reverse the process. The pouches are there for the rest of your life.

Chances are you are not getting enough fiber in your diet. In fact, most people in the United States average only 10 to 15 grams of dietary fiber a day. Most dietitians, however, use 25 - 35 grams of fiber a day as the minimum benchmark for a high-fiber diet.

Adding fiber and bulk to your diet helps promote regular bowel function and is very important in controlling and minimizing this disease. Foods rich in fiber, such as bran cereals, whole wheat bread, a variety of beans, and fresh fruits and vegetables help keep the stools soft and bulky. We all should make an effort to include more fiber, or roughage, in our diet. But, don't be too enthusiastic. That is, do not add too much fiber too soon. Otherwise, troublesome side effects, such as increased gas and bloating, may occur. The golden rule regarding fiber is to go slow. Start with small amounts and gradually increase the extra fiber in your diet.

If you have diverticulosis ... what about nuts?

So, unexpectedly, this long-term Harvard research study has shown that regular popcorn, corn, seed, and nut consumption reduces the risk of diverticulitis or bleeding. If you have diverticulosis and have been religiously avoiding eating tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, nuts, popcorn and similar foods, you should feel liberated - but don't go crazy. You might consider slowly adding some of these foods back into your diet. I don't suggest making any significant changes too quickly, but the truth is that there is no longer any scientific evidence to avoid any of these foods. We now have good evidence to suggest that eating more of these foods may be helpful. If you have any questions, ask your doctor.



Here is a photo taken during a colonoscopy examination. You can see the numerous inner openings of the diverticular “pockets” in the wall of the colon. It's like a bubble on an inner tube and you are inside the tire.