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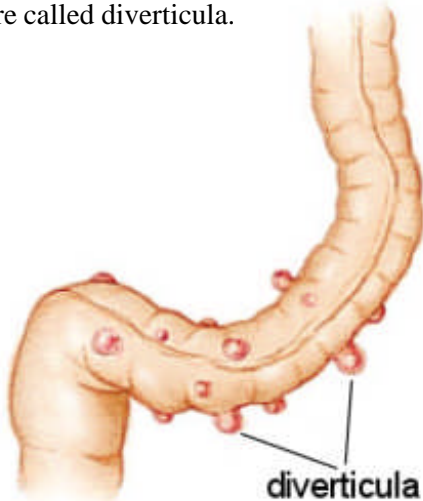
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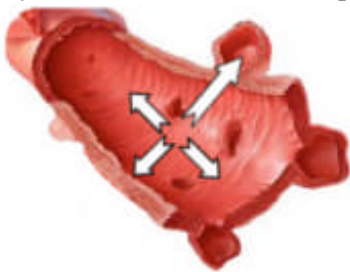
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Diverticular disease: 'Osis or 'Itis?

Small saclike pouches may develop in the wall of the colon. These pouches are called diverticula.



The wall of the colon contains muscles that generate pressure as they contract and move stool towards the rectum. In some people, particularly those with a disorder called irritable bowel syndrome (also known as “spas-



tic colon”), the pressure inside the colon can become high. If such high pressure occurs in an area of weakness in the muscular wall, the pressure may force a bit of the inner lining of the colon completely through the muscular wall, creat-

ing an outpouching or sac. This is similar to the inner tube of a tire being forced through a tear in the inner wall of the tire. The presence of these small sacs in the colon is called *diverticulosis*.



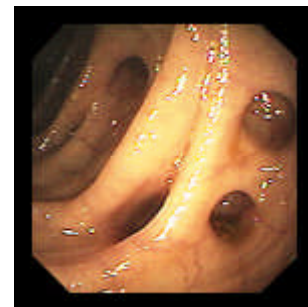
Diverticulosis is quite common, particularly after the age of 50, and almost always causes no symptoms.

Most people with diverticulosis are not aware of their condition. They may have episodes of pain or cramping in the low abdomen, but this is generally related to the spastic colon, and not to the small pouches. At other times, however, diverticulosis may cause painless bleeding from the rectum, which should be evaluated by your physician.

Diverticulosis generally requires no treatment. There is a theory that eating a high fiber diet (a diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains) can make the work of the colon easier by adding bulk to the stool and preventing constipation. The colon no longer has to generate high pressures, and the formation of new diverticula may be prevented. Your physician may therefore recommend eating a diet high in fiber, or adding a commercial fiber supplement and/or a stool softener to your diet.

An infection may develop in one or more of the diverticula in the colon, and this condition is called *diverticulitis*. Diverticulitis is similar to appendicitis,

where an infection develops in the appendix; the appendix is actually nothing more than a large diverticulum attached to the colon that everyone has from the



diverticula
as seen at
colonoscopy

time of birth.

In diverticulitis, there may be intense pain in the low abdomen, as well as fever and nausea. Bleeding is uncommon. Diverticulitis requires prompt evaluation by your physician, and treatment with antibiotics in order to prevent the spread of infection and development of an abscess, peritonitis or perforation of the colon. Diverticulitis often requires hospitalization, and severe cases may require surgery.

It was once believed that diverticulitis was caused by stool and small food particles becoming trapped within the small pouches, leading to infection. Patients were therefore advised to eat a low fiber diet, and especially to avoid foods containing small seeds. This theory is no longer universally accepted, and after patients have recovered from an attack of diverticulitis, they are generally placed on a high fiber diet, which may include foods with seeds, such as tomatoes.