

## **DIVERTICULAR DISEASE**

### **DIVERTICULAR DISEASE: A COMMON PROBLEM**

Diverticular disease is a common problem in the United States. It is estimated that more than 25% of Americans over the age of 40 have diverticular disease and by age 70, at least half of the population has this condition. Physicians believe that the condition is largely due to a deficiency of roughage (fiber) in our diet.

### **WHAT IS DIVERTICULAR DISEASE?**

The name comes from the Latin word diverticulum, which means "small diversion from the normal path." With diverticular disease, balloon-like sacs or pouches called diverticula develop in the walls of the colon (large intestine); these tiny pouches are formed when pressure causes the inside wall of the colon to bulge out through weak spots in the outer wall. Diverticulosis is a term indicating that the pouches are present, but there may be no symptoms, and many people may not know they have it. Diverticulitis, however, means that some of the pouches have become irritated or infected. The symptoms can include pain and fever. If you develop these symptoms, you should notify your doctor.

### **WHY IS THE COLON A PROBLEM SITE?**

The colon (larger intestine) is the last 5 to 7 feet of the digestive tract and its primary function is to remove excess water from waste coming into it from the small intestine. The waste is pushed along by muscular waves so it can be expelled when it reaches the rectum. As we grow older, weak spots develop in the outer muscular wall, making it possible for diverticula to form when excess pressure builds up inside the colon.

### **EXPERTS SAY TO ADD FIBER**

Experts urge healthy individuals to add fiber through a well balanced diet containing high fiber foods (both soluble and insoluble sources of fiber). Sometimes, that is difficult to do, even for the most healthy and disciplined eaters. 25-35 grams of fiber are approximately equivalent to 9-13 apples per day or 12 bowls of raisin bran or 12-16 slices of whole wheat bread. This is a difficult regimen. Fiber supplements can be the way to rectify the lack of fiber in an otherwise healthy diet.

### **HOW DO I AVOID EXCESS PRESSURE ON THE COLON?**

Constipation is the number one cause of excess pressure in the colon: When the colon has to push dry waste through it, it must use more force than normal. Preventing constipation is the key to preventing diverticular disease. You should be discouraged from using harsh chemical laxatives, since they only treat the symptoms of constipation and are habit forming. Laxatives do not provide the fiber needed for healthy bowel functions. Most physicians agree that lack of fiber is a major cause of chronic constipation resulting in diverticular disease.

### **HOW CAN INCREASED FIBER-IN THE DIET RELIEVE THIS CONDITION?**

Once diverticula have formed, there is no way to reverse the process. However, adding fiber to the diet does promote regular bowel habits and helps control and minimize the disease. Foods rich in fiber such as bran cereals, whole wheat bread, a variety of beans, fresh fruits and vegetables help keep the stool soft and increase bulk, thereby reducing the amount of pressure needed to move the contents through the colon.

### **WHAT ARE GOOD DIETARY HABITS?**

1. Eat at regular intervals, chewing your food well.
2. Drink plenty of water (8 glasses a day), milk, fruit and vegetable juices.
3. Exercise daily (walking, swimming, bicycling, etc).
4. Be sensitive to your bowel function and avoid straining.