



What is IBD?

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis (collectively known as inflammatory bowel diseases or IBD) are chronic inflammatory, non-infectious conditions involving the digestive system. They should not be confused with IBS (irritable bowel syndrome), which, despite similar symptoms, is a separate condition. Ulcerative colitis is restricted in the colon and/or the rectum, whereas Crohn's disease can affect any part of the gastrointestinal tract. Ulcerative colitis is twice as common as Crohn's disease.

Symptoms

Symptoms in both illnesses may include abdominal pain, diarrhoea, vomiting, rectal bleeding and weight loss. Both illnesses may be accompanied by various extraintestinal manifestations in e.g. the eyes and joints or on the skin. The intensity of the symptoms may vary a lot over time. Patients may experience long periods of remission and/or recurrent flare-ups.

Diagnosis

Peak age for diagnosis in both conditions is between 10 and 40, but the disease can occur at any age. The diagnosis is usually based on an endoscopic examination of the bowel and biopsies of pathological lesions. Certain indicators of IBD, such as infection and anaemia, can also be determined in blood tests.

Treatment

Most patients will be treated with anti-inflammatory medication (e.g. 5-ASA, steroids) or immunosuppressives (e.g. azathioprine). Sometimes antibiotics or biological therapies (e.g. anti-tnf alfa) may be used. If the illness does not respond to medication, surgery may be necessary. In ulcerative colitis patients, the entire colon may be removed, in which case the illness is "cured"; in Crohn's disease, only the affected parts of the intestine are removed. The disease may reoccur at the site of surgery.

IBD in Europe

Inflammatory bowel diseases affect over 2.2 million people in Europe, men and women alike. In most cases the illness can be kept under control with medication, but despite extensive research there is currently no known cause or cure for IBD.