

Ulcerative Colitis: New Medications, New Hope for Remission

After a 15-year hiatus, one patient was happy to go hiking again. Another said, “I always kept track of where the bathrooms were on my trip to college. Now I don’t have to.” Another no longer has to wear a diaper when performing on stage.

All three have ulcerative colitis, a chronic inflammatory disease of the large intestine (colon), and are on new medications called IL-23 inhibitors.

Perhaps better known to those who pay attention to television commercials as Omvoh, Skyrizi, and Tremfya, the medications work by blocking interleukin 23 (IL-23), an immune system protein that helps protect the body but in excess can lead to inflammation and ulcerative colitis. The medications reduce the symptoms of diarrhea, constipation, and stomach cramping, with a goal of becoming symptom-free, or in remission.

What Is Ulcerative Colitis?

Ulcerative Colitis is a type of bowel disease that causes long-term inflammation of the cells that line your rectum and colon (also called the large intestine). This may lead to sores called ulcers that can bleed and keep your body from digesting food like it should. You can take medicine to calm the inflammation and learn ways to ease its effects on your daily life.

Warning Sign: Abdominal Pain

A belly ache and diarrhea with blood or pus in it could be warning signs of ulcerative colitis. Some people have mild symptoms every once in a while, but others have worse symptoms more often.

Warning Sign: Weight Loss

The long-term inflammation that comes with UC can cause digestive problems. These could lead to Weight loss, Poor appetite, Nausea and Lack of growth in children

Other Warning Signs

Some people with ulcerative colitis have symptoms outside the digestive system. These may include Joint pain, Skin sores, Fatigue, Anemia (low red blood cell count) and Frequent fevers.

Ulcerative Colitis or Crohn's?

Ulcerative colitis symptoms are similar to those of another inflammatory bowel condition called Crohn's disease. UC only affects your large intestine. But Crohn's can happen anywhere in your digestive tract. It can cause symptoms from your mouth to your anus. Another disease called irritable bowel syndrome can cause long-term belly pain and diarrhea, but it doesn't lead to inflammation or sores in your intestines.

What Causes Ulcerative Colitis?

The exact cause isn't clear. But researchers think your immune system -- which defends you from germs -- is involved. When you have UC, your immune system may not react like it should to bacteria in your digestive tract. Doctors aren't sure whether this triggers the condition or results from it. Stress and your diet can make your symptoms worse, but they don't cause ulcerative colitis.

Diagnosing Ulcerative Colitis

To diagnose ulcerative colitis, your doctor will do a colonoscopy. They'll insert a tiny camera into your rectum to get an up-close look at the inside of your colon. This helps them spot inflammation or ulcers in the area. A colonoscopy can also help your doctor rule out other conditions like Crohn's disease and cancer.

Do UC Symptoms Go Away?

Your UC symptoms will come and go. The disease can go into remission, which means you may have no symptoms for long periods of time. Remission can last for months or years, but the symptoms will return.

Medications for Ulcerative Colitis

Medications can calm the inflammation inside your colon. The first one you'll usually try is from a group called aminosalicylates. If that doesn't help, your doctor might prescribe a steroid like prednisone. A third option is an immune modifier, which lowers inflammation by changing the activity of your immune system. It can take up to 3 months before you feel the benefits.

Biologic Therapies

If other medicines don't help, your doctor may suggest one of a group of medications called biologics. They help your body destroy proteins linked to inflammation. You usually get them in an IV. Another type of treatment is JAK inhibitors, which travel quickly through your bloodstream to block inflammation. You'll take these as a pill.

Surgery for Ulcerative Colitis

Up to 45% of people with ulcerative colitis will need surgery, either to repair a tear or remove a severely damaged colon. Your UC won't come back after the surgeon removes your colon. Newer surgical techniques mean you may not need a colostomy bag to get rid of waste.

Urgent Care for Ulcerative Colitis

The disease can sometimes cause problems that send you to the hospital. These may include a bleeding ulcer or severe diarrhea that causes dehydration. If this happens to you, doctors will stop the loss of blood and other fluids. If there's a tear in your colon, you may need surgery to fix it.

Ulcerative Colitis and Colon Cancer

Your risk for colon cancer goes up if you have UC. It depends on how much of your colon is involved and how serious it is. The odds also rise after you've had UC for 8-10 years -- and they go up over time. Treatment that puts your UC in remission may also make cancer less likely. Colonoscopy screening helps doctors find colon cancer early, when it's easier to treat.

- Use websites and cellphone apps to find restrooms in airports, train stations, or other large venues ahead of time.
- Carry extra underwear and wet wipes.
- Bring enough medication to last the entire trip, along with copies of your prescriptions.
- Tell your doctor about your plans to see if you need to take other precautions.