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Crohn's Disease Treatment and Management

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Special Concerns for Women With Crohn's Disease

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From body image to menstrual issues, Crohn's disease symptoms can affect women in ways that men don't experience — or at least not in the same way. Here's why this is and how women with Crohn's disease can cope.



Crohn's disease may occur as often in men as in women, but women tend to experience the disease differently than their male counterparts do and often have unique concerns. Symptoms of Crohn's disease in women can include pain during sex, fertility problems, missed periods, and a host of other issues or worries that men don't experience — or at least not in the same way.

If you're a woman with Crohn's disease, here are some issues to be aware of:

Crohn's disease in women tends to fluctuate with hormonal levels.

"Women with Crohn's disease report more bowel movements and cramping around the time of their period," says Marla Dubinsky, MD, co-director of the Susan and Leonard Feinstein Inflammatory Bowel Disease Clinical Center at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City and president of WeCare, an organization devoted to the advancement of women in the field of inflammatory bowel disease. Symptoms of Crohn's disease in men aren't affected by rises and falls in hormone levels, she says.

Crohn's disease may cause missed periods.

While Crohn's disease may worsen during the premenstrual and menstrual period, it can also cause missed periods (amenorrhea). "This may occur due to medications that treat Crohn's disease, weight loss, hormonal changes, or problems with absorbing nutrients," says Felice H. Schnoll-Sussman, MD, a gastroenterologist, the director of research at the Jay Monahan Center for Gastrointestinal Health, and an assistant professor of clinical medicine at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University in New York City. "Lack of menses isn't uncommon in a woman with active Crohn's disease."

Body image issues are more common in women with Crohn's disease.

Women with Crohn's disease are more likely to report body image dissatisfaction than men with the disease are, according to research published in the February 2015 issue of the journal *Inflammatory Bowel Diseases*. Exactly why they're more likely than men to have these issues is unclear, Dr. Dubinsky says, but it could be related to weight loss or embarrassment over symptoms or surgical scars.

Having Crohn's disease can impact a woman's sex life.

"Crohn's disease in women can affect the vaginal area," says Robynne Chutkan, MD, a gastroenterologist at the Digestive Center for Women in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and the author of several books, including *Gut Bliss*. "In addition to making life in the bathroom more challenging, it can complicate life in the bedroom." Specifically, Crohn's disease in women may cause swelling in the genital area. Occasionally, the development of fistulas — unwanted passages between two organs — can affect sex too, particularly a rectovaginal fistula.

"Some women with Crohn's disease develop a fear of intercourse because of pain, and others may avoid sex because of fear that stool will leak," Dr. Chutkan says. Some women may avoid dating altogether because they're embarrassed by the symptoms, including gas or frequent trips to the bathroom.

"If your doctor doesn't mention it, it's up to you to start the discussion," she says. It's possible to have healthy relationships and a satisfying sex life with Crohn's disease.

Fertility may be a concern for women with Crohn's disease.

"If you're in remission from Crohn's disease at the time of conception, you'll likely be able to conceive and have an uncomplicated pregnancy and healthy delivery," says Dr. Schnoll-Sussman. However, it's more difficult to become pregnant and have a healthy pregnancy if Crohn's disease is active. "Discuss your plans with your doctor well in advance of conception to help assure a healthy pregnancy," Schnoll-Sussman says.

Crohn's disease in women can affect pregnancy.

"The gastrointestinal tract and the reproductive tract are next-door neighbors," Chutkan says. "This means that what happens in one can affect the other."

Just having Crohn's disease, even if it's in remission, slightly increases the possibility of pregnancy-related issues, such as miscarriage. However, for some women, Crohn's disease actually gets better as a result of the normal changes to the immune system caused by pregnancy in general.

It's important to work with your gastroenterologist as well as your obstetrician-gynecologist to determine which Crohn's disease medications are safe to take during pregnancy. If you stop all medications and then have a flare, being pregnant can make it more difficult to get Crohn's disease back under control, according to the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America (CCFA).

Another pregnancy-related issue is that women with Crohn's disease may be at a greater risk of nutritional shortfalls during pregnancy than those who don't have the inflammatory bowel disease. "The ability to absorb nutrients can be compromised in Crohn's disease, so you have to eat well during pregnancy because the baby only has access to nutrients you absorb," Chutkan says.

Crohn's disease may be linked to cervical cancer risk.

Women with Crohn's disease are more likely to develop precancerous changes in cells in the lining of the cervix (cervical dysplasia), which is a known risk factor for cervical cancer, according to a study published in the journal *Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology* in April 2015. The exact reason for the association isn't fully understood, but this makes it important to get regular Pap screening tests, Schnoll-Sussman says.

Women with Crohn's disease may be at a higher risk of anemia.

Anemia due to blood loss is a condition marked by low levels of iron in the blood. In women with Crohn's disease, blood loss from menstrual flow decreases iron stores, and then there's the potential bleeding from the disease. What's more, decreased absorption of iron can also occur when the small intestine is inflamed, according to the CCFA. Talk to your doctor about whether you might need iron supplements.