New findings shed light on diverticulosis

I spoke with a friend recently who said he had a bad attack of diverticulitis. First, is that the same thing as diverticulosis? Also, can a high-fiber diet help prevent either condition?

Diverticulosis is a disease of the large intestine (the colon) in which pockets form and bulge outward from the colon wall. It gets more common as you age, particularly over age 60. Many people who have diverticulosis don't even know they have it, though it may cause mild cramps, bloating or constipation. It's estimated that about one-third of Americans over age 60 have diverticulosis.

But if the pouches become inflamed or infected, that's diverticulitis. Severe abdominal pain on the left side is the most common symptom of diverticulitis, and you might also experience fever, nausea, constipation or diarrhea, or possibly even vomiting. The condition can be quite severe, sometimes requiring hospitalization.

It's unclear what causes diverticulosis. For decades, the scientific community thought that the problem stemmed from a low-fiber diet, but findings from a study of 2,100 people recently published in the journal *Gastroenterology* casts doubt on that theory. In fact, the researchers found that people who reported the lowest fiber intake were 30 percent less likely to have diverticulosis than those who ate more fiber. The study also found no link between diverticulosis and constipation, physical inactivity, or intake of fat or red meat. The researchers, from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, believe gut flora may play a role in the development of the disease.

These findings echo a 2008 Harvard University study. Before that, eating popcorn or nuts was considered risky for people with diverticulosis. But the Harvard researchers found no such risk when they examined data from more than 47,000 men, 800 of whom developed diverticulosis. In fact, the study found that those who ate nuts at least twice a week were 20 percent less likely to develop diverticulitis; those who ate more popcorn had a 28 percent reduced risk.

These studies reveal that we still have a lot to learn when it comes to understanding the effects diet can have on specific conditions.

Although this might not help people who have suffered a bout of diverticulitis and want to avoid another, one thing is for sure: Your best bet for good health remains a varied, balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains along with low-fat dairy, lean protein and healthful oils.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.

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