



It is often asked whether dietary factors may explain why some people develop Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis (UC) and whether eliminating certain foods from the diet can help patients with these diseases get better. Individuals living in developed countries in Western Europe, North America and Australasia are more likely to be diagnosed with IBD than individuals living in underdeveloped countries and it is thought that the "Western diet" may be contributing to this. The majority of patients with IBD believe that their diet affects their disease; however, doctors tend to focus on medication and surgery rather than dietary changes. This is because, in contrast to medication and surgery, there have been few, if any, large and well conducted research studies demonstrating that changing the food one eats can make a significant improvement to the disease. However, it remains an active area of research.

Studies have demonstrated that a diet low in fibre, fruits and vegetables and heavy in animal fats and sugar is associated with a greater risk of developing IBD. However, the difference in the risk of developing IBD based on these dietary components is small and there is no evidence that eating a particular food or additive individually will cause IBD. Dietary factors act together with inherited predisposition and other environmental factors to cause IBD. Importantly, there is no evidence to suggest that by modifying your diet you can protect yourself from developing IBD.

There is good evidence that changing the

diet can theoretically help improve symptoms and reduce inflammation, particularly in children with Crohn's disease. Specifically, this is with exclusive enteral nutrition which is a highly processed drink that contains the essential building blocks of food. Such diets can be effective if taken instead of regular food. However, understandably patients find it difficult to tolerate. The mechanism by which exclusive enteral nutrition works to reduce inflammation is not known.

Beyond exclusive enteral nutrition, the situation is much more complex. Various other elimination diets have been proposed for use in IBD. The majority of these have not been tested in a rigorous scientific manner or shown to be effective when compared with established treatments. Often, patients identify some foods that trigger their symptoms or make them worse and it can be useful to keep a food diary to help characterise these.

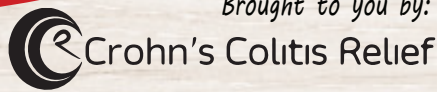
However, restricting one's diet is not without risks; it is very important that sufficient calories and important nutrients are still being eaten. It is advised that if one is considering eliminating certain foods from their diet or making substitutions that advice is obtained from a doctor or dietitian.

This article is for information only and should not be used in place of seeing a medical professional. If you have any questions regarding your own health, please see your doctor. This article has been written by Dr Adam Levine MBBS, PhD (doctor and researcher) and Dr Elena Schiff PhD (geneticist and researcher) at University College London.

The role of diet in Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

Part 1

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