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Patient information: Microscopic colitis (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is microscopic colitis? — Microscopic colitis is a condition that causes watery diarrhea. It involves the colon, which is another name for the large intestine ([figure 1](#)). There are 2 types of microscopic colitis. Both types cause the same symptoms and are treated the same way.

Microscopic colitis happens when the colon gets inflamed. But doctors don't always know what makes the colon inflamed. In some cases, the condition seems to be caused by an infection in the digestive system. In other cases, it seems to be caused by medicines. For example, a group of medicines called nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs, or "NSAIDs" for short, sometimes causes microscopic colitis.

Microscopic colitis happens most often in adults age 45 and older. Although the symptoms are bothersome, the condition is not life-threatening. It does not lead to serious problems, like cancer.

What are the symptoms of microscopic colitis? — Microscopic colitis causes episodes of diarrhea that is watery and not bloody. Most people have 4 to 9 watery bowel movements a day, but some people have more. An episode of diarrhea can last weeks to months.

People sometimes have other symptoms, too. These commonly include weight loss, belly pain, or feeling very tired.

Is there a test for microscopic colitis? — Yes. Your doctor or nurse will do an exam and order different tests. These can include:

- Blood tests
- Lab tests on a sample of your bowel movement
- Colonoscopy – This is a procedure that lets the doctor look at the inside of your colon. The doctor will put a thin tube with a camera and light on the end into your anus and up into your rectum and colon ([figure 2](#)). During a colonoscopy, the doctor will do a test called a biopsy. For a biopsy, he or she will take small samples of tissue from your colon. Then another doctor will look at the samples under a microscope to check for microscopic colitis. A biopsy is the only test that can tell for sure whether you have microscopic colitis.

How is microscopic colitis treated? — Treatment depends on your individual situation. It usually involves 1 or more of the following:

- Medicine changes – If your doctor thinks that your symptoms are caused by a medicine you take, he or she will recommend that you stop taking that medicine.
- Diet changes – Some people with microscopic colitis also have another condition called celiac disease. Celiac disease can cause diarrhea and other digestive symptoms. The treatment for celiac disease involves being on a special diet, called a "gluten-free diet." If you also have celiac disease, you will work with a dietitian (food expert) or other professional to learn how to eat a gluten-free diet.
- Anti-diarrhea medicines, such as [loperamide](#) (brand name: Imodium) – These medicines reduce the number of

bowel movements you have.

- A steroid medicine called [budesonide](#) (brand name: Entocort) – This is different from the steroids athletes take to build muscle. This medicine helps reduce inflammation in the colon.

If these treatments don't help enough to ease your symptoms, let your doctor or nurse know. There are other medicines or treatments that might help.

Some people need to be on treatment long term. That's because symptoms sometimes come back after treatment is stopped.

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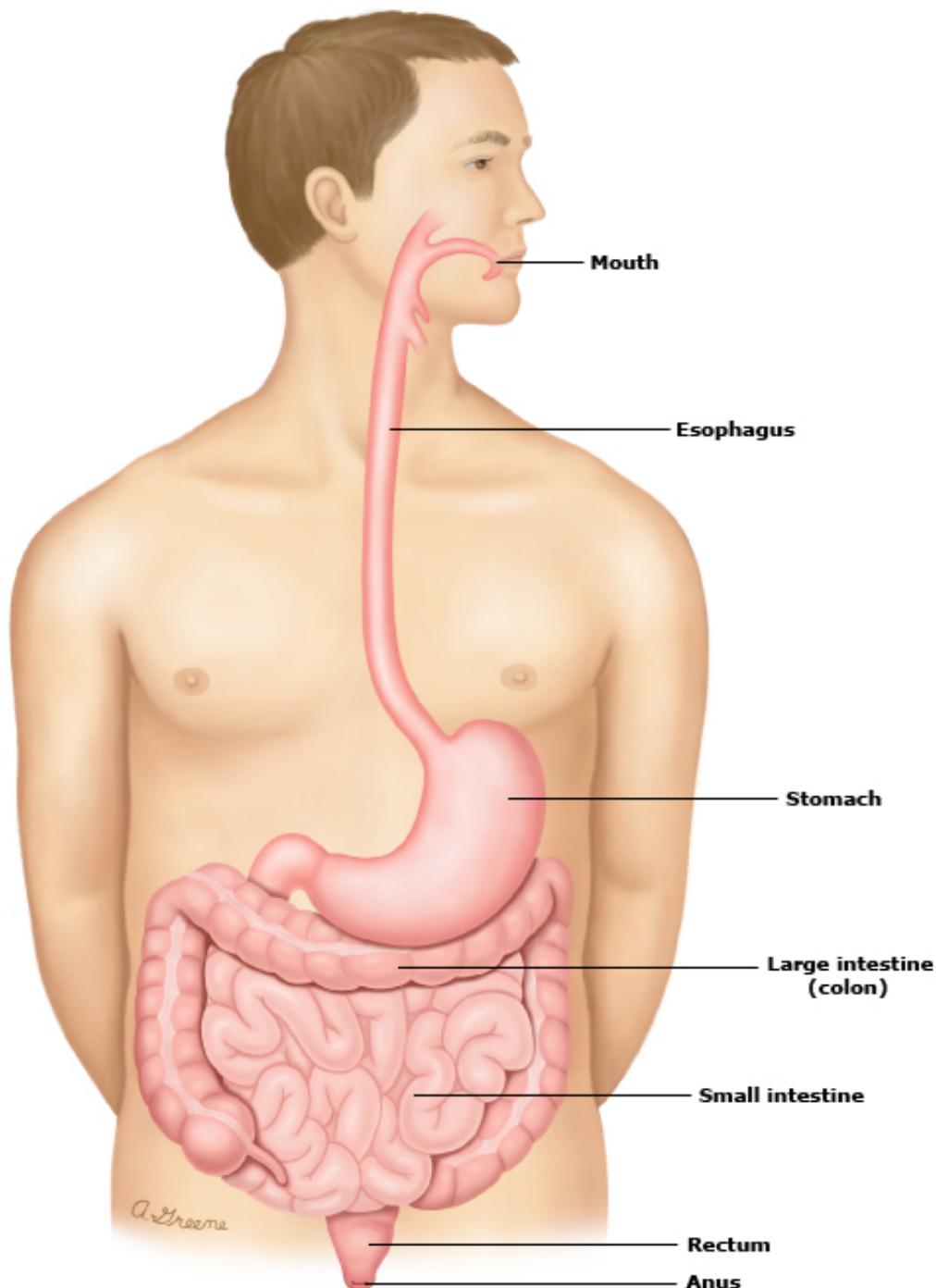
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GRAPHICS

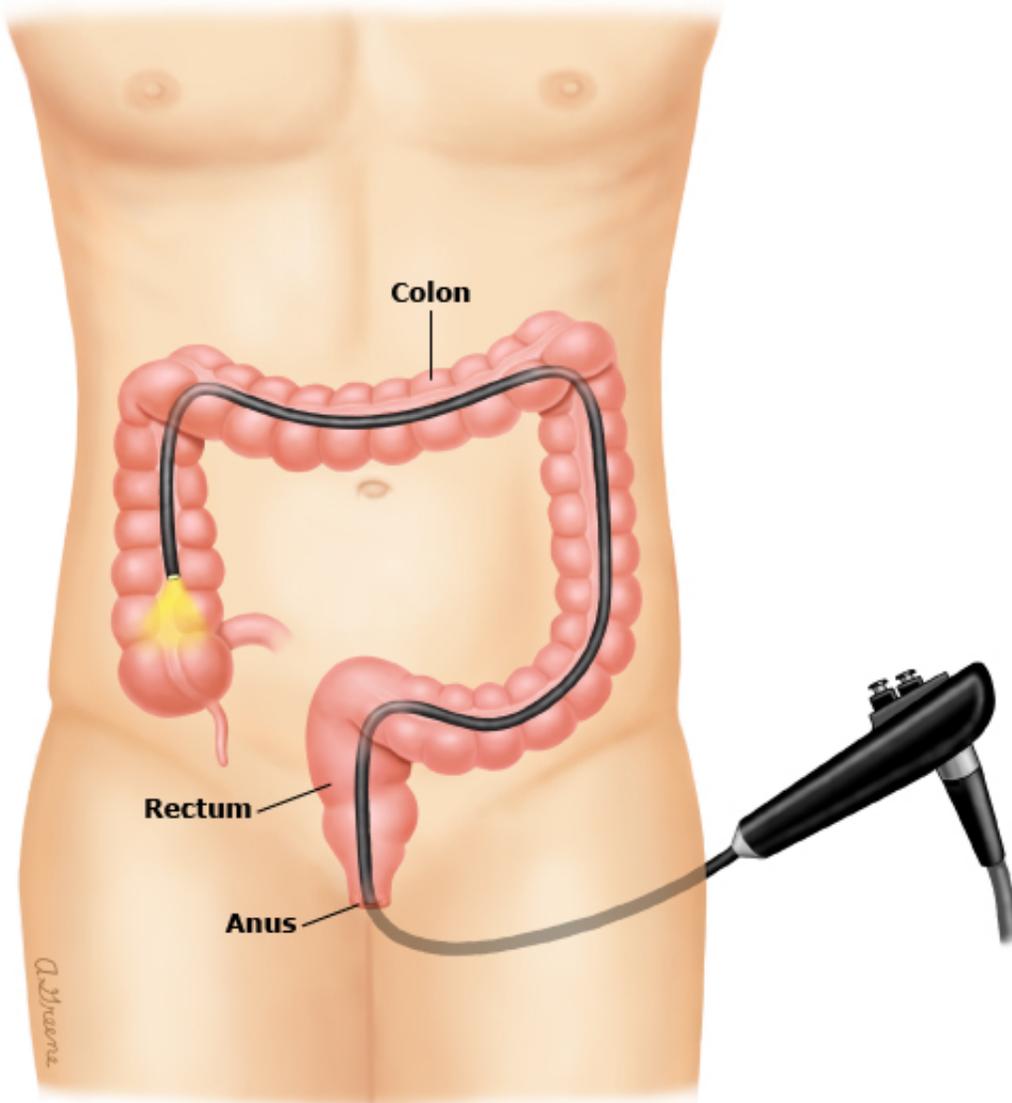
Digestive system



This drawing shows the organs in the body that process food. Together these organs are called "the digestive system," or "digestive tract." As food travels through this system, the body absorbs nutrients and water.

Graphic 66110 Version 4.0

Colonoscopy



During a colonoscopy, you lie on your side and the doctor or nurse puts a thin tube with a camera into your anus (from behind). Then the doctor or nurse advances the tube into the rectum and colon. The camera sends video pictures from inside your colon to a television screen.

Graphic 52258 Version 4.0