

Supporting a student with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis

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What is Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) describes two conditions: Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Crohn's disease can affect any part of the digestive system from mouth to anus, in particular the small intestine (small bowel) and colon. Ulcerative colitis affects the lining of the colon only, resulting in bowel complications.

IBD is sometimes confused with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS); however, they are not the same disease and are treated differently. Symptoms of IBD could include:

- abdominal pain, diarrhoea, vomiting and weight loss
- poor appetite, tiredness, lack of stamina, depression.

Other related issues could include arthritis, skin and eye problems and inflammation in and around the anus. Additionally, physical development may be delayed.

Treatment for these conditions is often a type of cortisone, which may contribute to an increase in appetite, weight gain, mood swings, pimples, difficulty concentrating and headaches. In some children surgery may be required in the case of severe complications.

Children with IBD do not have special dietary requirements and the disease is not contagious.

For further information see:

www.rch.org.au/gastro/clinical.cfm?doc_id=7518

Transition to school (following a colectomy operation)

Students affected by the disease may have parts of their bowel removed, which may be rejoined at a later stage. Following this operation, students may be required to wear a colostomy and/or ileostomy bag. They are usually able to take responsibility for changing their own bags. A gradual transition back to school is usually recommended, with no rough contact sport. It is advisable to hold a Student Support Group (SSG) meeting to develop an individualised program for the student's re-entry back to school.

Support mechanisms

Schools are encouraged to explore support mechanisms available to students with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. There are a range of resources and community groups available to assist schools, such as the Australian Crohn's and Colitis Association (ACCA) contactable on (03) 9726 9008, and the Australian Gastroenterology Institute contactable on (02) 9256 5455. Please contact the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Education Institute or the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) Gastroenterology Department for further information.

Strategies for schools supporting students with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis

The implementation of the whole-school and classroom strategies listed below will assist and support students with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. While the supports and initiatives aim to build the capacity of schools in recognising the general needs of these students, we also acknowledge that individual needs may vary depending on the severity of the condition.

Whole-school approach

- The school, health professionals, family and student should work in collaboration to best support the student at school.
- Discuss care management plans with the student/family in a Student Support Group (SSG) meeting.
- Discuss all treatment needs with the student, parent/guardian and offer as directed.
- Provide information and education about Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis to staff and students in consultation with the student/family.
- Establish a key contact person with whom the family and student can liaise with regard to Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and school issues.
- Assign a key contact person who can monitor, explore and assist with stress-related issues.
- Involve the student in extracurricular activities where possible. In some instances, the student may not feel up to participating.
- Recognise that a student's social relationships may be affected, particularly in relation to the physical effects of these conditions (such as pimples, short stature and embarrassing 'tummy rumbles'). This may have an impact on their ability to make friends and attend camps or sleepovers.
- The student may often need to go to the toilet urgently and with little warning. Arrange seating (i.e. provide a seat close to the door) so the student may leave class quickly and/or arrange use of staff toilet facilities. To further facilitate this process, implement a system of codes or devise a leave pass to enable the student to leave the classroom with a minimum of fuss.
- Make provision for special arrangements on buses or during excursions (for example, arranging an aisle seat in the theatre).



- Ensure that special provisions are in place for a VCE student with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. A VCE student support group may need to be formed with the student's subject teachers.

Classroom approach

- Educate the class about Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis in consultation with the student and parents/guardians. This may assist with possible adverse reactions from peers. This may work particularly well for the younger student.
- Encourage the older student to talk about their condition with close friends and teachers.
- Ensure that the student receives relevant educational support for any missed work. The student may be absent for short periods of time because of illness or doctor's visits, or may need to spend a few days or weeks in hospital.
- Include the student in special events and activities such as class parties or school productions.
- Recognise that concentration may be affected and that there may be a lesser degree of participation in sport, excursions and other school activities.
- Encourage the student to take part in all sporting activities if possible, perhaps even at a less intense level. The student may be affected by abdominal pain, joint problems or general poor health.
- Watch out for signs of tiredness and unhappiness and discuss concerns with the parent/guardian if necessary.

Contacts: RCH Education Institute and Department of Gastroenterology and Clinical Nutrition RCH

The RCH Education Institute and Department of Gastroenterology and Clinical Nutrition RCH encourage schools to contact us should they require further information.

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