



Hard to Digest

Gastrointestinal issues are rising in the Milwaukee area

BY ERIN TREDER

While we've all had stomach pain or the feeling that something we ate didn't agree with us, the feeling usually passes quickly and we're able to resume our normal activities and eating patterns. But for many, this discomfort doesn't let up, negatively affecting every aspect of their day-to-day lives.

This was the reality for Stephanie Gunderson, M.D., before she was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. Now 35, Gunderson was diagnosed while she was an undergraduate at St. Norbert College.

When her symptoms were at their worst, "sleep was a big issue because I had so much abdominal pain," she says. "I lost about 20 pounds. There were very limited food choices that I could have that didn't affect my condition."

She had no choice but to eat the same plain

sandwich every day, out of fear that anything else she consumed would set off a myriad of digestive woes — including the need to be near a restroom almost constantly.

During that time, Gunderson was a member of the St. Norbert College Green Bay Packers cheerleading team. After the season was complete, things got so bad she was asked not to return. "It appeared I'd lost heart," she says. "But it was due to my symptoms, lack of sleep and poor nutrition." She'd previously seen her primary care physician to treat her symptoms but decided at this point she needed to see a gastroenterologist.

After her diagnosis of ulcerative colitis (UC), an inflammatory bowel disease that affects the digestive tract, she began taking the anti-inflammatory drug mesalamine for treatment. She was finally able to return to some degree of normalcy after a year of suffering.

Gastrointestinal Issues On The Rise

As many as 70,000 cases of inflammatory bowel disease are diagnosed in children and adults each year, according to the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports an estimated 3 million cases in the United States.

Many factors that contribute to the onset of inflammatory bowel disease, says Poonam Beniwal-Patel, M.D., gastroenterologist at Froedtert, who says she's seen a rise in her office as well. Some include autoimmune disease, genetics, environmental triggers, stress and lifestyle.

In addition to UC and Crohn's, Beniwal-Patel has seen an increase in other gastrointestinal conditions, including Celiac disease, liver disease and cases of fatty liver. Liver issues are most likely tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in increased alcohol consumption both locally and globally, she says.

Colon cancer is becoming increasingly common, especially among younger people, Beniwal-Patel explains, which is why new guidelines suggest people at average risk should start regular screening at age 45 instead of the previously recommended 50.

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Treatment Is Possible

When she first sees her patients, Beniwal-Patel says they're often suffering from unbearable issues including abdominal pain, joint pain, nausea, fatigue, anemia and bloody stools. The severity of the symptoms affects the direction of treatment, but Beniwal-Patel takes a multi-disciplinary approach, focusing on diet and mental health in addition to medication.

However, though medications and treatment plans are available, there is no complete cure. "Because inflammatory bowel disease is due to our own body's immune system attacking the GI tract, it's a life-long disease and cannot be cured," she says. "We do have medications for inflammatory bowel disease that can treat the inflammation and then result in resolution of symptoms in most patients for a better quality of life," she says.

New therapies to treat ulcerative colitis and Crohn's are in the works, which could be promising for some patients suffering from gastrointestinal issues, says Beniwal Patel. New stem cell therapies are being studied as well—in fact, the Medical College of Wisconsin was just part of a recently concluded study.

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For those who are just beginning to seek treatment options, she recommends that patients seek care at a healthcare organization that has a multi-disciplinary healthcare team which includes GI-focused providers, nurses, dietitians, and pharmacists.

Living With UC

Today, Gunderson — a reproductive endocrinologist and infertility specialist at MCW and a busy mom of two girls — says her symptoms are under control.

She'll have an occasional flare-up that, interestingly enough, doesn't include the gastrointestinal symptoms she experienced in the past; instead, she says she will get arthritis in her large joints. "My hips, my wrists, or my

elbows really hurt," she says. In the past, she's had such bad hip pain that she couldn't walk.

As part of the surveillance for ulcerative colitis, Gunderson has colon screenings every three years. She also has a DEXA scan every five years to measure her bone density, since ulcerative colitis can lead to an increased risk of osteoporosis.

The anxiety of having frequent screenings and not knowing what else could be going on is a big issue for Gunderson, as well as the concern she could potentially have passed on her condition to her girls. "I always say I wouldn't wish this on anyone," she says.

"My advice: Know your body. Know what's not normal for you. If something doesn't seem right, seek specialty care," she says. **MKE**



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