FLARE-UPS

A flare-up of Crohn's Disease or Colitis is when your symptoms have come back or got worse. It may feel worrying, upsetting or frustrating to know that you are having a flare-up. But we're here to help.

This information can help you know:

- The signs to look out for
- What to do if you think you're having a flare-up
- How to lower your risk of a flare-up

This information is for people in the UK with Crohn's or Colitis. It may also be useful for those involved in their care. It's based around recommendations and guidance for adults. But it may also be useful to understand flare-ups in children. It should not replace advice from your healthcare team.

Where we use the term Colitis in this information, we mean both Ulcerative Colitis and Microscopic Colitis.

CONTENTS

Key facts about flare-ups 2

What is a flare-up? 3

What are common symptoms of a flare-up? 5

How long does a flare-up last? 6

What triggers a flare-up? 7

I think I'm having a flare-up – what should I do? 8

Getting support from your GP 9

When to get emergency care for a flare-up 10

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

What tests may I have for a flare-up? 11
What is the treatment for a flare-up? 12
Treatment for severe flare-ups 13
How can I look after myself during a flare-up? 14
Mental wellbeing during a flare-up 15
How can I lower my risk of a flare-up? 16
Help and support from Crohn's & Colitis UK 17
Helpline service 17
Virtual Social Events 17
Crohn's & Colitis UK Forum 18
Help with toilet access when out 18
How to help others living with Crohn's or Colitis 18
About Crohn's & Colitis UK 19
About our information 20

KEY FACTS ABOUT FLARE-UPS

- A flare-up of Crohn's or Colitis is when symptoms come back or get worse. This may be due to increased inflammation in the gut. Between flare-ups, you may have periods where you feel better, with no or few symptoms.
- Flare-up symptoms vary. They can include diarrhoea, urgent or frequent pooing, tummy pain, and feeling generally unwell.

- Flare-ups can last anywhere from a few days to several weeks or months. This can depend on several things, including how much inflammation you have and the medicine you take.
- If you think you are having a flare-up, it's important to get advice from your IBD team or GP. If you have a personalised care and support plan, you should follow this.
- Blood and poo tests may help confirm whether your symptoms are due to increased inflammation or something else.
- It's not possible to prevent every flare-up. But there are things you can do that might lower your risk. These include continuing to take medicines you are prescribed, even when you feel well.

WHAT IS A FLARE-UP?

Crohn's and Colitis are conditions that you have for life. But your symptoms may come and go over time. You may have periods where:

- Your condition is under control. You feel generally better with no or few symptoms. This is known as remission.
- Your condition is not under control. Your symptoms may come back after a period of not having any. Or if you always have some symptoms, they may get worse. This is known as a flare-up. It can also be called a relapse.

A flare-up in symptoms may be caused by an increase in inflammation in your gut. But it can also be due to other reasons. These can include:

- Complications related to your Crohn's or Colitis, such as a narrowing of your bowel. This is known as a stricture.

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

- Another condition that you may have, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Some people may have both Crohn's or Colitis and IBS-like symptoms.
- A virus, tummy bug or food poisoning.
- A reaction or intolerance to certain foods.

It can be difficult to tell what is causing a flare-up in symptoms. There are tests that a healthcare professional can do to help confirm if your symptoms are due to inflammation. We have more information on these in the tests for flare-ups section.

> "Because of the absence of bleeding with Microscopic Colitis, it can be hard to know if your symptoms are returning, or if you're simply reacting to something else - like a stressful period, something you ate, or a bug or virus. It wasn't until things really started to deteriorate that I even considered it might be my Microscopic Colitis."
>
> **NICOLA**
> **LIVING WITH MICROSCOPIC COLITIS**

During remission, inflammation lessens. This is when you usually feel better. Some symptoms may not go away completely during remission.

How frequently you get flare-ups is different for everyone. Some people may have flare-ups several times a year. Others may go for years between flare-ups. For some people, symptoms are ongoing and never fully go away.

© Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

> "Even if you have been well for a long time, flares can happen to anyone and at any age. Knowing your symptoms and recognising that something has begun to change is crucial in managing a flare."
>
> **RACHAEL**
> **LIVING WITH CROHN'S DISEASE**

Flare-ups can have a huge impact on daily life. They can affect work, school, relationships and leisure or social activities. Knowing how to manage them and get the support you need can make a big difference.

WHAT ARE COMMON SYMPTOMS OF A FLARE-UP?

Common symptoms you may get in a Crohn's or Colitis flare-up can include:

- Diarrhoea, or passing poo which is looser than usual for you. In Crohn's or Ulcerative Colitis, this may contain blood. With Microscopic Colitis, urgent, watery diarrhoea without blood is often the main symptom.
- Passing poo more frequently than is usual for you, or passing poo at night.
- Urgently needing to poo, or not being able to reach the toilet in time.
- Pain in the tummy area.
- Weight loss.
- Generally feeling unwell.

Other symptoms can sometimes include constipation and bloating and wind.

You may also have symptoms outside your gut during a flare-up. These can include:

- Extreme tiredness, known as fatigue

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

- Joint problems, including painful or swollen joints
- Mouth ulcers
- Skin rashes
- Red, itchy and sometimes painful eyes

We do not list every possible symptom of flare-ups here. Everyone experiences them differently. Your symptoms may also change over time. You may have different symptoms during a flare-up than you had when you were first diagnosed.

HOW LONG DOES A FLARE-UP LAST?

Flare-ups can last anywhere from a few days to several weeks or months. How long it lasts can depend on many things, including:

- How bad the inflammation in your gut is
- What treatment you have for your Crohn's or Colitis, if any
- How quickly you get treatment for a flare-up
- How well any treatment works for you
- Whether you continue to be exposed to anything that might make your symptoms worse
- Your age and general health

How long your flare-up lasts can also vary from one flare-up to the next.

There is also no standard pattern for how a flare-up progresses. Symptoms can come on suddenly. Or you may notice them developing slowly, and building up over time.

You may find it helpful to keep track of your flare-ups in a diary or by using an app. You might start to notice a pattern with the symptoms you get, and how quickly they pass.

WHAT TRIGGERS A FLARE-UP?

It's not usually possible to say exactly what has caused a flare-up. It's likely due to a combination of several factors, some of which cannot be controlled. But there is some evidence that the following triggers may contribute to flare-up symptoms.

- Stress and anxiety.
- Certain foods. This can be different for everyone.
- Gut infections.
- Certain medicines. These include:
    - Antibiotics
    - Beta blockers
    - Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), like ibuprofen
    - In Microscopic Colitis, medicines to reduce stomach acid, known as proton pump inhibitors or PPIs
    - In Microscopic Colitis, medicines to treat depression, known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs
- Smoking, if you have Crohn's.
- Weather and other environmental factors, including heatwaves and being at high altitude.
- Poor sleep.

Not taking medicines as prescribed for your Crohn's or Colitis is also an important risk factor for flare-ups. This can include forgetting or skipping doses.

Talk to your IBD team, GP or pharmacist if you're worried about the effects of any medicines. Do not stop taking any medicine you have been prescribed without talking to a healthcare professional first. Some evidence suggests NSAIDs can make Crohn's or Colitis symptoms worse. This could be more likely if your condition is active, or you take NSAIDs for a long time. But it's difficult to know for sure.

The factors that contribute to flare-ups can be different for everyone. And it's not always possible to control or avoid every potential trigger. But it may help in managing your condition to be aware of some of the potential triggers. We have more on this in the section on how can I lower my risk of a flare-up?

I THINK I'M HAVING A FLARE-UP – WHAT SHOULD I DO?

If you think you're having a flare-up, it's important to get advice from a healthcare professional as soon as possible. Getting the right treatment when you need it may help to prevent your condition from getting worse. It may also help to prevent complications.

> **"It's okay to err on the side caution - trust your gut if you think something is wrong. Had I known at the time that Microscopic Colitis can return, even after several years, I might have pushed to be seen sooner."**
>
> **NICOLA**
> **LIVING WITH MICROSCOPIC COLITIS**

There are several different ways to get help when you need it:

- You may have a flare-up plan of what to do and who to contact. If so, follow this. This is sometimes called a personalised care and support plan. This is something an IBD team should put in place when you're diagnosed with Crohn's or Colitis. You can read more about this in our information on the IBD standards.

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

- If you do not have a plan, contact your **IBD team** or GP. If you do not have access to an IBD team, your GP may be able to help you access appropriate support. We have more on this below.
- If you are unable to contact your GP or IBD team, contact **NHS 111** or your **local out-of-hours service**.
- Sometimes you may need to get emergency help. We have more on this at the end of this section.

We know that many people find it difficult to get the help they need when they are having a flare-up. Sometimes you may need to try several times to get hold of your IBD team, or to get an appointment with your GP. Keep trying the different options listed here, including contacting NHS 111 if you need to. And do not be afraid to push for an urgent appointment if you feel that you need it.

If you have been unable to get a response from your IBD team, you could also try contacting the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) at your hospital. PALS are there to help with concerns or problems you may have when using NHS hospitals in England. Similar organisations exist in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

PALS do not give medical advice. But they may be able to advise how to get in touch with the IBD team.

Getting support from your GP

If you are seeing your GP about a flare-up or Crohn's or Colitis, it can help to plan what you want to say or ask. We have more information and questions you could ask in our appointment guide for Crohn's and Colitis.

Your GP may be able to contact the IBD team on your behalf, to ask advice about treatment. They may also be able to ask the IBD team to see you, or see you sooner than planned. This may depend on arrangements in your local area.

It's also worth asking your GP what else they may be able to help with while you are waiting to see an IBD team. This might include:

- Help with managing pain and other symptoms
- Organising mental health support
- Referring you to a dietitian

When to get emergency care for a flare-up

You should go to A&E or call 999 if you feel that you have a life-threatening emergency. For Crohn's and Colitis, this may include if you:

- Are being sick and it has blood in it, or looks like used coffee grounds or soil
- Have severe tummy pain that is not going away
- Are bleeding constantly from your bottom
- Have a large amount of blood, or large blood clots when you poo

You know your body and condition better than anyone. There may be other times when you need to get emergency care. If you are not sure whether you need emergency care, contact **NHS 111** online or by phone. They can check your symptoms and tell you what to do.

It's important to contact a healthcare professional if you think you are having a flare-up. Our friendly Helpline can give information and support if you think you are having a flare-up. But they are not medically trained and are unable to give individual medical advice.

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

WHAT TESTS MAY I HAVE FOR A FLARE-UP?

If you're having signs of a flare-up, your doctor or nurse may want to carry out some tests. These include tests on your poo. These are also known as stool tests. They may include tests for the following:

- Faecal calprotectin. This tests levels of the protein calprotectin in your poo. This can also be a sign of inflammation in the gut.
- Bacteria, including *Clostridium difficile*, also known as *C. diff*. Your doctor may want to rule this out as a cause of your symptoms.

Your doctor or nurse may also recommend some blood tests. These include:

- Full blood count. This looks at the number of different types of cells in your blood.
- C-reactive protein, known as CRP. This looks for a protein in your blood that can be a sign of inflammation.
- Erythrocyte sedimentation rate, known as ESR. This looks at how quickly red blood cells in a blood sample settle. It gives a measure of inflammation.

These tests can be helpful in confirming whether or not your symptoms are due to inflammation. But they do not always give a definite answer. For example, levels of inflammation markers can sometimes be low, even when you are having a flare-up. Or if they are raised, this may be due to other causes, like infection.

Normal levels of faecal calprotectin or blood markers do not rule out active Microscopic Colitis. If your symptoms suggest a flare-up, you may be asked to have additional tests.

Sometimes, your doctor or nurse may ask you to have a scan or endoscopy to look for inflammation in your gut. An endoscopy is a test that uses a long, thin, flexible

tube to look closely at your gut lining. Types of endoscopy include a colonoscopy and a sigmoidoscopy.

You can find out more about all of these tests in our information on tests and investigations.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR A FLARE-UP?

What treatment your doctor may recommend for a flare-up will depend on several things. This includes whether you have Crohn's, Ulcerative Colitis or Microscopic Colitis and what part of your gut is affected. It will also depend on your symptoms and how bad they are.

Your doctor should check what treatments you usually take for your Crohn's or Colitis. They may check you have been taking these regularly, and as prescribed.

Your doctor may recommend taking:

- A short course of steroids to get your symptoms under control. If you have Microscopic Colitis, budesonide is often the main treatment used. In Crohn's and Ulcerative Colitis, you may also be prescribed prednisolone.
- If you have Ulcerative Colitis, a 5-ASA (aminosalicylate), such as mesalazine. If you are already taking a 5-ASA, your doctor may recommend increasing the dose while you are in a flare-up.
- Other medicines to try and get your symptoms under control. This may be if initial treatments do not work or you are unable to take them. These may include azathioprine and mercaptopurine, methotrexate, or biologic or targeted medicines.
- Other medicines to help with symptoms such as diarrhoea, constipation and pain. See other treatments for Crohn's and Colitis for more information.

5-ASAs – self-management in a flare-up

If you have Ulcerative Colitis and are already taking **5-ASAs**, you may be able to temporarily increase the amount you take during a flare-up. If you have a personalised care plan, advice for increasing your dose may be included in it. Only do this if a healthcare professional has told you that you can.

It's important to know the maximum dose for the particular 5-ASA you are taking. You should never take more than this. It can vary by type and brand. You can find this in the Patient Information Leaflet inside your medicine box, or online at **medicines.org.uk/emc** .

You may also be prescribed suppositories or enemas to keep at home and use during a flare-up. Follow any instructions you have been given about taking these. This may be in addition to any tablets you take by mouth.

If your symptoms do not improve, contact your IBD team or GP.

Treatment for severe flare-ups

If you have very severe symptoms or you are not responding to usual treatments, you may need to be admitted to hospital. In hospital, you may be offered different medicines, such as an infusion of steroids. If you have Ulcerative Colitis, you may also have a type of immunosuppressant medicine called ciclosporin. In some cases, if your symptoms are very severe or are causing complications, you may be offered surgery.

If you keep getting flare-ups, your healthcare team may want to review your usual maintenance treatment. This is any treatment you take regularly to lower the risk of

further flare-ups. They may also talk to you about whether surgery might be an option.

HOW CAN I LOOK AFTER MYSELF DURING A FLARE-UP?

It's important to get advice from a healthcare professional and take any treatment you need for a flare-up. But there may also be things you can do to help yourself feel better.

- Keep taking your usual medicines. Continue taking any medicines you usually take for your Crohn's or Colitis, unless your doctor or nurse advises you otherwise.
- Stay hydrated. If you have diarrhoea, it's important to make sure you are drinking enough to replace what you have lost. You also need to make sure you get the right balance of sugars and salts into your body to keep hydrated. Our information on **dehydration** gives tips on preventing dehydration.
- Eat well. You may not feel like eating much during a flare-up. And you may find that certain foods make your symptoms worse. But it's still important to get enough energy and nutrients. We have tips for eating during a flare-up in our information on food.
- Rest when you need to. Fatigue tends to be worse during a flare-up. There are different things you can try that may help with fatigue. We have information on fatigue and how to manage it.
- Manage stress. Stress can contribute to flare-ups. Doing things to try and ease any stress may make you feel better. Find out more in our information on mental health and wellbeing.
- Take pain relief when you need to. You might be able to take over-the-counter painkillers to manage any pain you have during a flare-up. Ask your doctor of pharmacist what the best option is for you. Avoid non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen. This is because they can

make your symptoms worse. Find out more in our information on other treatments.

- Let others know. If you have a trusted friend, partner or family member, it can help to let them know you are having a flare-up. They might be able to help support you with practical tasks. These might include collecting prescriptions, preparing meals or caring responsibilities. Friends and family may be a good source of emotional support too. Our talking toolkit can help with starting the conversation.

We know that not everyone has support from family or friends. You may also find that your IBD team, GP practice or local authority, or voluntary organisations, can help you find additional support.

We have lots more information on managing symptoms, as well as living with Crohn's or Colitis.

Mental wellbeing during a flare-up

It's common for flare-ups to affect your mental wellbeing. This might be due to the impact of dealing with your symptoms and how it's affecting your life. There is also a direct link between your gut and your brain that may affect your mental health during a flare-up. You can find out more in our information on mental health and wellbeing.

You may find it helps to reach out to others for support. This may mean:

- Talking to a supportive friend or family member
- Connecting with others who have Crohn's or Colitis
- Getting psychological support from a trained healthcare professional

You can also contact our friendly helpline for information and support.

HOW CAN I LOWER MY RISK OF A FLARE-UP?

It's not possible to prevent every flare-up of Crohn's or Colitis. But there are several things you can do to lower the risk of them happening, or how bad they may be.

These include:

- Taking your medicines for Crohn's or Colitis exactly as prescribed by your IBD team, even when you feel well.
- Managing stress and anxiety.
- Talking to your IBD team or a dietitian about any foods you think may be triggering symptoms.
- Getting into a good sleep routine.
- Avoiding non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), unless they have been recommended by a doctor or pharmacist.
- Asking your healthcare team about any other medicines that may be contributing to your symptoms.
- Giving up **smoking**, if you have Crohn's and smoke. It's also important for your overall health to try to give up smoking if you have Ulcerative Colitis. But the effect on risk of flare-ups is more uncertain. You should discuss this with your IBD team.

You may find it helpful to keep track of your symptoms using a diary or app, to see if you notice any potential triggers. You may then be able to take some measures to reduce or manage these. Remember that it's not possible to avoid every single trigger. Many flare-ups happen despite people doing everything they can to manage their condition.

HELP AND SUPPORT FROM CROHN'S & COLITIS UK

We're here for you. Our information covers a wide range of topics. From treatment options to symptoms, relationship concerns to employment issues, our information can help you manage your condition. We'll help you find answers, access support and take control.

All information is available on our **website.**

Helpline service

Our helpline team provides up-to-date, evidence-based information. You can find out more on our **helpline web page.** Our team can support you to live well with Crohn's or Colitis.

Our Helpline team can provide support by:

- Providing information about Crohn's and Colitis
- Listening and talking through your situation
- Helping you to find support from others in the Crohn's and Colitis community
- Providing details of other specialist organisations

You can call the Helpline on **0300 222 5700**. Or visit our **LiveChat service**. You can read our information on **when the Helpline** is open for more details.

You can email **helpline@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk** at any time. The Helpline will aim to respond to your email within three working days.

Our helpline also offers a language interpretation service, which allows us to speak to callers in their preferred language.

Virtual Social Events

We offer people affected by Crohn's or Colitis the chance to join a virtual social event with others across the UK. The events will be a chance to chat, share

experiences and potentially learn from others. Each event may have a specific topic but the overall discussion will be driven by what those attending wish to talk about.

Family, friends and colleagues are more than welcome to attend.

Visit our **Virtual Social Events** page to find out what is available.

Crohn's & Colitis UK Forum

This closed-group Facebook community is for anyone affected by Crohn's or Colitis. You can share your experiences and receive support from others. Find out more about the **Crohn's & Colitis UK Forum.**

Help with toilet access when out

There are many benefits to becoming a member of Crohn's & Colitis UK. One of these is a free RADAR key to unlock accessible toilets. Another is a Can't Wait Card. This card shows that you have a medical condition. It will help when you are out and need urgent access to the toilet. See **our membership webpage** for more information. Or you can call the Membership Team on **01727 734465**.

HOW TO HELP OTHERS LIVING WITH CROHN'S OR COLITIS

We want to make a difference to people affected by Crohn's or Colitis. But we can't do that without help.

If you want to support others in our community, here are some ways you can get involved:

- Volunteering: If you'd like to volunteer, we have a range of ways you can get involved. Find out more about our **volunteering roles**.
- Campaigning: None of our award-winning campaigns would be possible without our amazing community of dedicated campaigners. Your voice

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

really does matter. Find out more about **joining our Campaigner Network**.

- Fundraising: Every pound you give helps power our life-changing work. Together we'll create bold campaigns, fund pioneering research, and give vital support when people need it most. Find out about ways to **fundraise**.
- Research: Research aims to improve the lives of people living with Crohn's or Colitis. One day, it may even find a cure. But good quality research can only happen when people with Crohn's or Colitis are involved. Find out about ways **you can be involved in future research**.
- Share your story. We hear from people every day who rely on the Crohn's and Colitis community for help and support. Why not **share your story** to help others feel seen or inspired?

ABOUT CROHN'S & COLITIS UK

We're Crohn's & Colitis UK and we're changing what it means to live with these lifelong gut conditions. 1 in 123 people in the UK have Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis. These are unpredictable conditions that could flare up at any time.

No one should face that alone. That's where we can help.

We provide trusted information and support cutting-edge research. We also lead bold campaigns to get more people talking about Crohn's and Colitis. We help people understand these conditions, give them the attention they deserve and bring people together to create change.

This year, 25,000 people will be told they have Crohn's or Colitis. Once diagnosed, the obstacles continue. Today, there is no cure. People simply don't understand these conditions. So, we have listened. It's time for change & we're leading the way.

 © Crohn's & Colitis UK, 2026

Our information is available thanks to the generosity of our supporters and members. Find out how you can join the fight against Crohn's and Colitis by calling **01727 734465.** Or you can visit **our website**.

About our information

We follow strict processes to make sure our information is based on up-to-date evidence and is easy to understand. We produce it with patients, medical advisers and other professionals. It is not intended to replace advice from your own healthcare professional.

You can find out more on **our website**.

We hope that you've found this information helpful. Please email us at **evidence@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk** if:

- You have any comments or suggestions for improvements
- You would like more information about the evidence we use
- You would like details of any conflicts of interest

You can also write to us at **Crohn's & Colitis UK, 1 Bishops Square, Hatfield, Herts, AL10 9NE.** Or you can contact us through the **Helpline** on **0300 222 5700**.

We do not endorse any products mentioned in our information.

© Crohn's & Colitis UK 2026

Flare-ups, edition 3

Last review: November 2026

Next review: November 2029

Trusted Information Creator

Patient Information Forum