

Assisting students with Crohn's disease

As an educator, you will probably come across a student with Crohn's disease (CD) at some point. If and when that happens, you can play an important role in supporting that young person and helping them meet their full potential by learning more about CD and understanding the impact that living with CD can have on young people.

About Crohn's disease

More than 75,000 Aussies and 5 million people worldwide have IBD.¹ There are two main types of IBD: CD and ulcerative colitis (UC). Both of these conditions cause visible damage to the gut.² These diseases are not contagious.

IBD is not the same as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which may have similar symptoms but doesn't cause visible damage to the gut or changes in blood tests.²

No one is 100% sure exactly what causes CD

The medical community believe that CD is caused by an overactive immune response in the gut, which leads to inflammation and ulceration.³ There is no way of telling who will get CD, but people who have a history of CD in their family are more likely to develop the condition.³

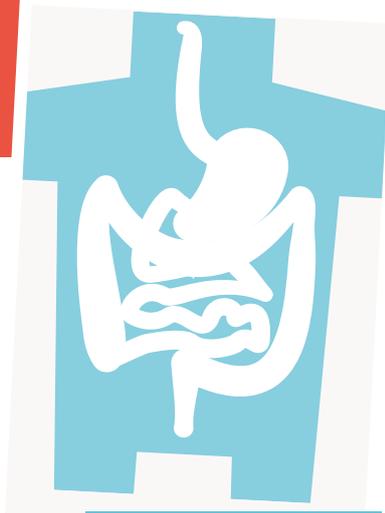
Common symptoms of CD can include:²

- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss

In some people, CD also causes complications outside of the GI tract, such as skin rashes, arthritis and inflammation of the eye.²

Crohn's disease is a disease of young people

Most people with CD are diagnosed between the ages of 15 and 35 years, although it can occur at any age.^{1,2} It is a chronic condition, so it's something that people have to live with throughout their entire lives.



■ Area that can be affected by Crohn's disease

CD can involve any part of the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, from the mouth to the anus. It commonly affects the small intestine and/or the large intestine.²

CD causes affected parts of the GI tract to become inflamed, leading to pain and discomfort.

While there is no cure, medical treatments can help manage CD

There are a number of treatment options available for CD depending on the extent and severity of the disease. These may include changes in diet, medication that can be given as tablets, enemas, injections or intravenous infusion, and surgery.⁴ Some of the treatments for CD have to be administered by a healthcare professional in a clinic, which may mean a young person taking time out from school to receive treatment. Other treatments can be self-administered but they may require special storage conditions. Any medication can cause side effects that have the potential to impact a young person's ability to engage with school activities, including classes, sports and social events.

Being aware of what type of treatment your students with CD are on and how it might affect them can help you offer relevant support.

Impact of Crohn's disease

Chronic conditions, such as Crohn's disease (CD), can be particularly debilitating for young people, affecting their physical development, education and social life during those critical formative years.⁵

CD can affect young peoples' physical development



Poor growth

This can be caused by physical damage to the digestive tract making it less capable of absorbing nutrients, loss of appetite, delayed puberty and/or the side effects of certain medications used to treat CD.^{6,7}



Delayed puberty

This can be caused by malnutrition, inflammation, which can affect sex hormone levels, and being underweight. Delayed puberty may lead to less of a growth spurt during adolescence and can also have a psychological impact on young people if they aren't developing at the same rate as their peers.^{6,8}



Low bone mineral density

Bone mineral density or 'BMD' refers to the amount of calcium and other minerals that make up bones. CD and some of the medications used to treat it can interfere with bone development, leading to low bone mineral density.⁶ If this persists into adulthood, it can result in a greater risk of bone fractures.^{6,7}

CD can affect young peoples' education



Missing classes

Young people with CD may have to miss classes in order to attend medical appointments or to receive certain treatments that have to be administered by a healthcare professional. They may also have to stay home from school if they are suffering from a disease 'flare' (periods of time when the symptoms of CD are particularly severe) or if they are experiencing side effects caused by their medication.



Impaired academic performance

There is evidence that CD can negatively impact cognitive functions, such as reasoning, memory, attention and language. Although the underlying neurobiological mechanisms have yet to be established, this may be caused by the inflammation associated with the disease itself, nutritional deficiencies or as a side effect of some medications used to treat CD.^{9,10}



Difficulty sitting exams

The unpredictable symptoms associated with CD can make it difficult for young people to sit exams. The prospect of being unable to visit the bathroom for several hours can cause anxiety for young people with CD above and beyond the usual stress of sitting an exam.

CD can affect young peoples' social life



Missing social events

Adolescence is an important time for developing social skills and potentially lasting friendships. However, being unable to attend social events, such as birthday parties and sleepovers, due to the symptoms of CD can put some young people at a disadvantage, making them feel like they're missing out.



Lack of confidence

The physical symptoms of CD, such as having to go to the bathroom more often, being smaller than their peers or going through puberty later, as well as missing out on social events, can negatively affect a young person's self-esteem and confidence.



Bullying

Unfortunately, children and adolescents will often draw attention to anything seen as 'different' or 'weird' in their peers. In most cases, this results from a lack of understanding of what the other person is going through. Nonetheless, it can be very distressing for a young person with CD to be victimised because of their condition.

Understanding how CD can impact young peoples' physical development, education and social life can help you take positive steps to make sure that they are supported in all of these areas

How can I help?

There are a number of positive steps that you and your school can take to help young people living with Crohn's disease (CD) feel supported and get the most out of their education.

Enable flexible learning

Young people living with CD may need more time or additional support to complete school work or exams. It is a good idea to come up with a personal learning plan that is tailored to meet the needs of each young person living with CD. This plan can include:



Prioritising work so that the most important subjects and tasks are done first. That way if a student can't get everything done at least they will have the basics covered.



Assigning less work when a student is going through a bad patch. It can be difficult to judge how much work a young person with CD is capable of handling at any given time. This should be discussed with the student, their parents and, if required, their healthcare team.



Planning for long absences from school by finding or developing learning resources and assessments that can be used from home or hospital. For example, would a student be able to use a video calling service to attend classes remotely?



Making use of government provisions for students who are ill or experiencing personal hardships. The provisions allow these students to make alternative arrangements for completing their school work and sitting exams (e.g., Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority Special Provision; South Australia Special Provisions in Curriculum and Assessment Policy; Queensland's Policy on Special Provisions for School-based Assessments).

Develop a toilet access plan



People with CD may need to use the bathroom frequently, sometimes with little warning. There is nothing worse for a young person with CD than having to call attention to themselves and their condition by constantly requesting permission to go to the bathroom during class. Consider giving any students with CD a 'Class leave card' that allows them to go to the bathroom without asking permission whenever they need to. A template for a **Class leave card** is available to download and print in the **School support kit** section of this website. If your school is big and has a number of bathrooms, it might also be a good idea to put together a bathroom map to help your students with CD find the nearest facilities no matter which class they are in.



Help them feel included

While the symptoms of CD can sometimes be difficult to manage, particularly during a flare, many young people with CD are able to live a 'normal' life most of the time. While you should be aware of their condition and how it might affect them, try to **avoid being over-protective** of your students with CD as this can make them feel singled-out and different from their peers. As long as they are physically and emotionally able, they should be allowed to participate in all school activities. With a bit of forward planning and preparation, young people with CD should be able to do sports, join clubs and go on field trips.

There are a number of resources available in the School support kit section of this website (www.ownyouribd.com.au/schoolsupport) to help you answer some common questions that your students with CD may have about their condition and how it might affect their school life.

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