

# Teacher's Guide

Supporting students with Crohn's or colitis



crohn's  colitis

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# Understanding their journey



Students with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis face unique challenges in school. With your support, they can thrive academically while managing their health.

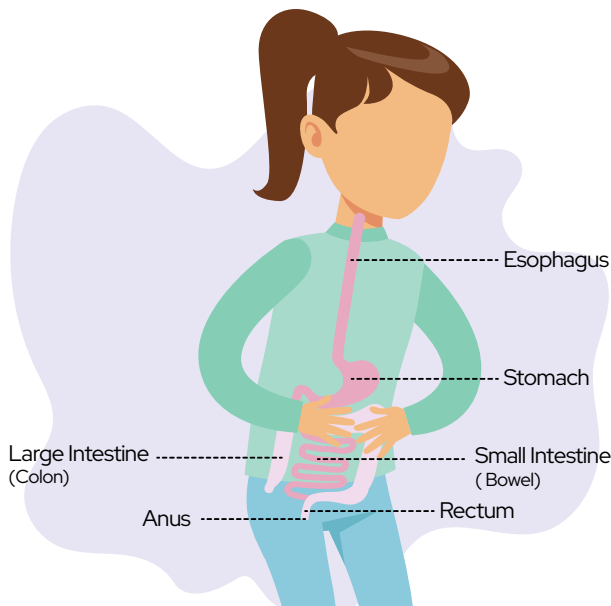
# What are Crohn's and colitis?



Crohn's and colitis are the two most common forms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). They're not contagious, but they can be painful and disruptive. These conditions inflame the digestive tract, making it hard to digest food, absorb nutrients, and eliminate waste.

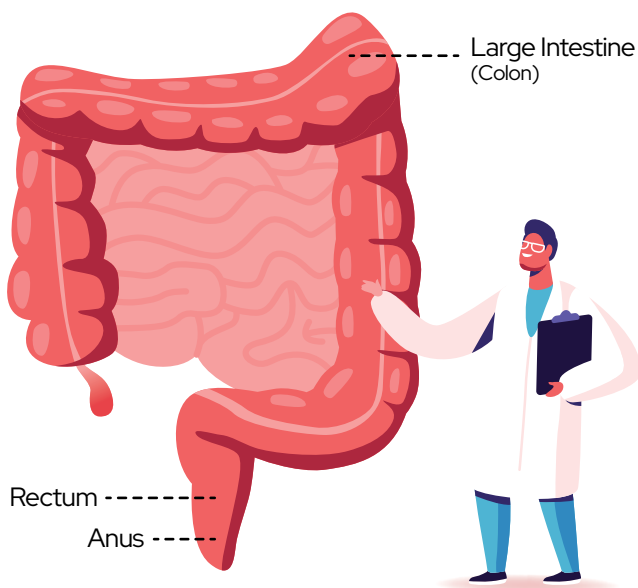
In Canada, over 322,000 people live with Crohn's or colitis—including about 6,000 children. Most are diagnosed between ages 15 and 30, but rates among children have nearly doubled since 1995.

## What is Crohn's disease?



With Crohn's (named after the doctor who first described it in 1932), inflammation can occur anywhere in the gastrointestinal tract, but it's usually present in the lower part of the small bowel and the colon. Inflammation can occur between healthy portions of the gut and can penetrate the intestinal layers from the inner to outer lining. Treatments exist that can help alleviate symptoms, but there are no cures.

## What is ulcerative colitis?



Colitis only affects portions of the large intestine, including the rectum and anus, and typically only inflames the innermost lining of bowel tissue. Colitis can be controlled with medication and, in severe cases, can come back or evolve into something else by surgically removing the entire large intestine.

# Common symptoms

Common symptoms of Crohn's and colitis can include:

- Severe abdominal pain and cramping
- Urgent, frequent diarrhea (sometimes with blood)
- Fatigue
- Nausea or vomiting
- Loss of appetite and weight
- Joint pain
- Bloating and gas



# How you can make a difference



Every student's experience with Crohn's or colitis is different. Students managing these diseases may carry both the physical and emotional weight of living with a chronic condition. Beyond the visible symptoms, they may face hidden challenges that affect how they see themselves and interact with others. Your understanding and flexibility can help them feel safe, supported, and included. Invite students to share what works best for them when they're comfortable to do so. This will help them build self-advocacy skills while feeling respected



and supported. Some of the feelings you can watch out for include:

- Embarrassment and/or difference from peers
- Anxiety, stress, or depression
- Fatigue or overwhelm
- Low self-esteem

These feelings can lead to withdrawal, acting out, or neglecting their health. Your empathy and encouragement can make a world of difference. If you notice ongoing signs of stress or withdrawal, connect your student with a counsellor or social worker for additional support.

# Working together with families



Open communication with parents or caregivers is key. They can share updates on symptoms, medications, and dietary needs.

Ask questions, stay informed, and work together to support your student's learning.

# Medications



Students may take medications to reduce inflammation or manage symptoms. These can change over time, so it's important to:

- Know what medication(s) the student is taking (parents or caregivers can provide this information)
- Understand possible side effects
- Keep emergency contact information close by

As a teacher, you won't administer medication, but staying aware helps you respond appropriately if their symptoms change.

# Food and mealtimes

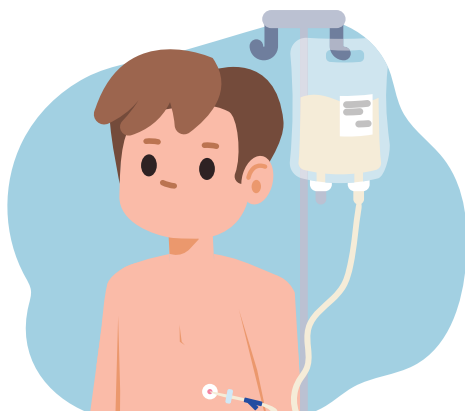
A child with IBD may follow a personalized diet based on what works for them. Some foods can trigger symptoms, and these may change with medication.



It's important to:

- Give parents or caregivers notice for any events where there will be food
- Ask for food suggestions (for example, dairy-free pizza options)
- Encourage them to bring safe alternatives
- Focus on the celebration, not the food, to help them feel included

Some students may use a feeding tube, such as a percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (or PEG) for nutrition. If so, treat it matter-of-factly and avoid drawing attention.



# Washroom access



Students may need to use the washroom frequently and without warning, sometimes over 20 times a day during flare-ups. Private, stigma-free access helps them stay engaged in learning. You can help students feel comfortable by:

- Allowing unrestricted washroom access
- Offering a discreet hall pass
- Seating them near the door for easy exits
- Arranging access to a private washroom if possible

# Accidents happen



It's not a bad idea to keep a change of clothes at school and have emergency contacts on file. If an accident occurs, respond discreetly and compassionately. It's a simple way to support students with dignity.

# Managing absences



Students may miss school due to symptoms, appointments, or hospital stays. Students' ability to manage symptoms or attend medical appointments can be affected by factors like transportation, financial barriers, or cultural expectations. Try to stay flexible with deadlines and keep in touch with their parents or caregivers. A quick check-in can help students feel connected and cared for.

# Tests and exams



Any stress or anxiety a student may experience during tests or exams can worsen symptoms. During a test or exam, we recommend:

- Allowing washroom breaks and offering extra time to make up for the time away from the test (if needed)
- Seating students near the exit
- Rescheduling tests or exams if appointments or hospitalizations conflict



# Physical and extracurricular activities



Activity is important for children's physical and emotional well-being. Encourage participation in activities, but let students set their own pace. Stay in touch with their parents or caregivers and support students in doing what feels right for them.

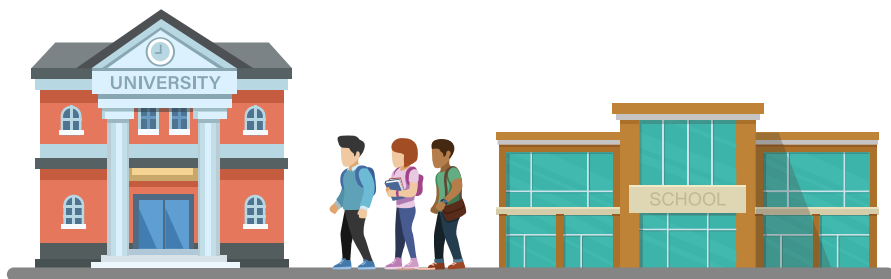
# Preventing bullying and respecting privacy



Some symptoms they experience could lead to teasing or bullying. Remember that cultural or religious beliefs can also shape how students and families talk about illness, diet, or washroom use. Approach these topics with curiosity and respect, and address bullying quickly to build a supportive classroom culture.

Let students decide if they want to share their diagnosis or not. If they're open to it, consider a class activity (like a science lesson on the digestive system) to build understanding, always with the students' and parents' input.

# Looking ahead: post-secondary education



Transitioning to college or university can be tough. Students may be managing their health independently for the first time. Teachers and guidance counsellors can also help students reflect on how to balance health and independence, encouraging self-advocacy and self-care as part of post-secondary success.

Encourage them to connect with a post-secondary institution's accessibility office early, even if they're in remission. Accommodations might include:

- Flexible course loads
- Private residence rooms
- Adjusted deadlines
- Access to class notes

# Helpful resources

Additional resources are available on Crohn's and Colitis Canada's website, [crohnsandcolitis.ca](https://crohnsandcolitis.ca), including guidebooks, videos, and a customizable teacher letter.

# About Crohn's and Colitis Canada



Crohn's and Colitis Canada's Promise is to find the cures for Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by these diseases. Crohn's and colitis are the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). We are one of the top two health charity funders of Crohn's and colitis research in the world, investing over \$150 million in research since 1974. With the support of our donor community, we are on a relentless journey to transform the lives of people affected by Crohn's and colitis through research, patient programs, advocacy, and awareness.

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to brave today and believe  
in tomorrow**



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