

Effectively Treating Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Doctors who treat inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) know that no two IBD patients are alike. IBD, a group of intestinal illnesses that includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, affects an estimated 1 million Americans. Symptoms and disease process vary considerably from patient to patient.

The UVA Digestive Health Center of Excellence has a team of IBD specialists employing the latest diagnostic tools and promising therapies to help physicians develop successful, individualized treatment strategies for IBD patients.



Fabio Cominelli, M.D., director of UVA's Digestive Health Center of Excellence, and Stephen Bickston, M.D., (on right) are working with colleagues to advance treatment for IBD while searching for a cure.

"An accurate diagnosis is critical to managing the disease, but pinpointing the problem area can be difficult," says Stephen J. Bickston, M.D., medical director of UVA's IBD clinical program. Roughly 10 percent of colitis cases are unable to be differentiated as either ulcerative colitis or Crohn's. And Bickston sometimes sees patients who were misdiagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a more common condition that shares some symptoms of IBD but lacks a structural or chemical cause.

KEY TO DIAGNOSIS

Enterodysis is an advanced radiologic technique for investigating the small intestine that requires special attention and expertise not found in many hospitals. Unlike conventional fluoroscopic studies, which look at intervals of the intestinal tract, enterodysis provides a continuous picture and consequently has a far lower false-negative rate. "It often turns out to be the key to making a definitive diagnosis," says Bickston, who points out that GI radiology, as well as GI pathology and endoscopy at UVA, has practitioners with decades of expertise in performing and interpreting studies on IBD patients. "During the past decade, our endoscopic volume has climbed from 4,000 to 13,000 procedures per year," adds Bickston.

ONE OF ONLY 16 NIH DIGESTIVE HEALTH RESEARCH CENTERS IN THE NATION, UVA HAS SEVERAL LEADING-EDGE IBD CLINICAL TRIALS.

EFFECTIVE SYMPTOM MANAGEMENT

Identifying a treatment regimen that controls inflammation and relieves symptoms with minimal side effects or use of steroids is essential, but a difficult goal to achieve. "The significant challenge I see is the use of repeated courses of steroids," Bickston says. "At least two-thirds of patients have meaningful side effects with even a single course of steroids. And even doses as low as 7.5 mg and durations of therapy as short as two weeks can be associated with bone loss."

LEADING RESEARCH CENTER

Under the leadership of Fabio Cominelli, M.D., Ph.D., UVA's Digestive Health Center of Excellence is at the forefront of IBD research and patient care. UVA has several leading-edge IBD clinical trials that particularly focus on the study of biologic therapies, which serve to suppress inflammation. UVA was in fact the first in the state to offer clinical trials of Remicade® (infliximab), that helps up to 80 percent of IBD patients who do not respond to conventional treatments. "Research by Dr. Cominelli and others literally brought biologic therapies from the bench to the bedside," Bickston notes.

Investigative probiotic therapy, which uses beneficial bacteria to improve intestinal functioning, and Leukine® (sargramostim), a cancer drug that may serve to boost the immune system, also offer hope to patients with ulcerative colitis and Crohn's. The center also has developed an animal model of Crohn's disease and is investigating a cure.

Because patient monitoring is critical to successful IBD management, UVA's nurse coordinators have developed a database to help referring physicians monitor lab work and patient care. UVA nutritionists can develop individualized diets for IBD patients, who often have dietary deficiencies. And if surgical intervention becomes necessary – the majority of patients will need one or more surgeries, says Bickston – colorectal surgeons experienced in IBD are available for immediate consult.

"UVA's Digestive Health Center of Excellence is a national leader in advancing both the scientific understanding of this complex illness with no known cure," Cominelli says, "and developing treatment strategies for physicians and their patients."

To request a consult, call 800-552-3723.

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Charlottesville Omni Hotel, October 9-10

12TH INTERNATIONAL GASTROINTESTINAL CANCER MEETING
The Rounda and Zahmer Hall, University of Virginia, October 20-22

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