key points

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Diverticulosis is the term used to describe multiple diverticula, which are blind-ended out-pouching of mucosa that communicate with the lumen of the large bowel, usually located in the sigmoid and descending colon. Diverticulosis is common in elderly individuals, but most are asymptomatic.

Diverticulitis, or diverticular disease, refers to any condition causing symptoms secondary to colonic diverticulae. Some 20-30% of individuals with diverticulosis will develop diverticulitis, which responds to broad-spectrum antibiotics and conservative management in 85% of cases. Surgery is the mainstay of treatment in those who fail to respond or who develop complications. The risk of recurrence after resolution of a first attack is 2% per annum or 20-30% lifelong risk. A high-fibre diet may reduce further complications.

Presentation is variable, depending on the effects of the inflammation. Commonly, there is lower abdominal pain, typically localised to the left iliac fossa, and often associated with fever and general malaise. Symptoms are generally of gradual onset and the patient may experience altered bowel habit accompanied by rectal bleeding.

The complications of diverticulitis include haemorrhage, stricture and obstruction, perforation, abscess formation, and fistulation into adjacent organs such as the bladder or vagina.

The process of diverticulitis is thought to be secondary to the obstruction of diverticulae by faeces or mucus, or mucosal erosion within the diverticulae.

The decision to carry out elective resection is based on a balance of risk versus potential benefit. In patients aged 40 years or younger with aggressive disease elective resection is indicated.

There is a subgroup of patients who require special consideration. Diverticulitis is uncommon in patients younger than 50 years, but when it does occur it seems to be most prevalent in obese young men. Patients in this subgroup who present with diverticulitis at a younger age appear to encounter more complications and are more likely to require surgery.