

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

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What is it?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common cause of stomach pain, cramping, and changed bowel habits. Properly digested food normally leaves the stomach and passes into the *small intestine* and then into the *large intestine* (colon). In irritable bowel syndrome, the intestines might contract abnormally and cause food to move too fast or too slowly through your system.

IBS is also called *functional bowel syndrome*, *irritable colon*, *spastic bowel*, and *spastic colon*. It's not the same as *inflammatory bowel diseases*, like ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease.

What causes it?

Irritable bowel syndrome is caused by disturbance of normal bowel *function*. It is not caused by a structural abnormality, it does not require surgery, and does not lead to cancer.

Think of the digestive system as one long muscular tube extending from the mouth to the rectum. Normally food is chewed, digestive juices added, and nutrition extracted as the food moves through. Occasionally this function becomes irregular and disorganized resulting in alternating diarrhea and constipation.

Who gets it?

IBS is the most common digestive disorder. It is believed that 12% of Americans are affected by it. For unknown reasons, IBS usually appears in late adolescence or early adulthood, and women seem to develop it twice as often as men do. Women more commonly report abdominal pain and constipation whereas men more commonly report diarrhea.

What are the symptoms?

IBS can cause diarrhea, constipation, or a mixture of both. It can also cause pain, cramping, bloating and gas in your abdomen that either comes in bouts or lasts for long periods. The pain of IBS may go away when you pass gas or have a bowel movement.

Some people may have no pain with IBS but may have diarrhea which happens right after they awake in the morning or right after eating. Often there is a feeling

like you still need to have a bowel movement after you have already had one.

Other symptoms of IBS include heartburn, belching, loss of appetite, nausea, and rarely vomiting. IBS may also cause a number of symptoms that are unrelated to the digestive system, including fatigue, anxiety, difficulty in concentrating, headaches, shortness of breath, and dizziness. These symptoms tend to come and go.

The symptoms may get worse when you are under stress, such as when you travel, attend social events, or change your daily routine. Your symptoms may also get worse if you don't eat right, or after you've eaten a big meal. Women who have IBS may notice symptoms during menstrual periods.

The symptoms of IBS can closely mimic more serious digestive disorders. Warning symptoms of a digestive disorder other than IBS include blood in the stool, fever, recurrent vomiting, unexplained or sudden weight loss, and constant abdominal pain. Your doctor may wish to perform a variety of additional tests to exclude serious disease and to be certain of the diagnosis, especially if your symptoms start after age 50 or if you have a family history of other bowel disorders.

How do you prevent it?

For those individuals who have IBS it's very difficult to prevent the inevitable attacks of constipation and diarrhea. Usually the best approach is to control the disease as much as possible so that it does not affect your life in any significant way.

Can it be treated?

The best way to handle IBS is to eat a high fiber diet, avoid foods that seem to make you feel worse, and find ways to handle your stress. No single treatment works for everyone. Finding the right treatment can take time and patience. There are select medications which may help during severe attacks.

- **Fiber** is not digested, absorbs water and adds bulk to the stool. Because of this, it minimizes diarrhea, prevents constipation, and may also reduce bloating, pain, and other symptoms of IBS.

Fiber is in fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals. Eating any of these things will add fiber to your diet or you can add fiber by eating bran. You should eat 20-35 grams of fiber daily.

Increase the fiber in your diet slowly. Some people feel bloated and have gas if they increase the amount of fiber they eat too quickly. When you start eating more fiber, drink more water too. The fiber needs to absorb water for it to work. It may take a while for you to feel better after you have started eating more fiber. So, don't be discouraged if you don't feel better right away.

- **Psyllium (Metamucil, Fiberall, Perdiem)** acts like fiber in the intestines. It is most helpful for people who mostly have constipation. Take it with one or two glasses of water.

- **Avoiding foods** that make you feel worse may also help. Keeping a diary of what you eat may be a good way to find out what foods bother you.

If you think a food makes you feel worse, try not eating it for a while. But don't cut out foods entirely unless they have caused you problems more than once. Some people with IBS avoid foods that they don't really need to. This can hurt more than help because it reduces the variety of food you eat.

Foods that may make symptoms worse include foods that are high in fat or caffeine. Fat and caffeine can cause your intestine to contract or spasm which may cause cramping. If you have pain after eating, you should try a low fat diet with extra protein.

If gas is a problem for you, you might want to avoid foods that tend to make gas worse. These include beans, cabbage, and some fruits. You also may want to avoid apple juice or grape juice, and you may want to eat fewer bananas, nuts, and raisins.

If milk and other dairy products bother you, you may have *lactose intolerance*. Lactose intolerance means that your body can't digest the sugar in milk called *lactose*. If this seems to be the case, you may need to limit the amount of milk and milk products in your diet. You may also try taking *lactase* (which helps you digest lactose) in a pill or liquid. You can buy lactase (also called Lactaid, Lactogest, or Surelac) at the store.

- **Avoid stress** that may trigger the constipation and diarrhea of IBS. The more that you can do to avoid emotionally charged situations that produce anxiety, the less likely you will be bothered by IBS. Many people deal with stress through exercise, relaxation training, or meditation. You may also want to consider talking to a counselor about the things that are bothering you.

- **Stop smoking** and avoid smoky rooms since nicotine is another trigger of IBS. Chewing tobacco can have the same effect.

- **Probiotics** provide helpful bacteria to normalize digestion and help bowel function which may reduce bloating and gas.

- **Anti-spasmodic medicines** like peppermint oil (187-225 mg 3 times daily) can reduce cramping if your main symptom is cramping and loose stools after eating. Prescription varieties are also available but generally provide only short term relief from symptoms.

Antispasmodics can be helpful, but have side effects like dry mouth, blurred vision, dizziness and constipation.

- **Loperamide (Imodium)** may also be helpful, especially when diarrhea is frequent or prolonged.

- **Antidepressants** may be prescribed for you even if you are not feeling depressed. Antidepressants have been helpful in improving the pain of IBS as well as the constipation and diarrhea.

- **Prosecretory agents** can improve symptoms primarily in people with constipation dominant IBS. The main possible side effects are diarrhea and nausea.

- **Serotonin agents** are approved for women with severe disabling IBS with diarrhea. Constipation and rare ischemic colitis are potential severe adverse effects.

Tips on controlling IBS

- Eat a varied high fiber diet
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Avoid high fat foods
- Eat small meals instead of large meals
- Learn to reduce stress
- Avoid using laxatives
- Exercise daily

Are there complications?

No. While IBS will likely recur throughout your life, it won't get worse. It doesn't cause cancer or require surgery and it won't shorten your life. IBS is inconvenient and uncomfortable, but it is not harmful.

IBS may have caused you to avoid doing certain things, like going out, or going to work or school. The key to living with IBS is learning to control it and not letting it control you.

In summary

- The most common symptoms of IBS are pain, diarrhea, and constipation.
- The best way to handle IBS is to eat a high fiber diet, avoid foods that seem to make you feel worse, and find ways to handle stress.
- Since there is no specific treatment for IBS, nor is there a cure, the goal is to control the symptoms of IBS.
- For more information, see the IBS self-help web site at www.ibsgroup.org.