

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

What Is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder of the intestines that leads to cramping, pain, gassiness, bloating, and changes in bowel habits. Some people with IBS have constipation (difficult or infrequent bowel movements); others have diarrhea (frequent loose stools, often with an urgent need to move the bowels); and some people experience both.

The cause of IBS is not known. It is considered a *functional* disorder because there is no sign of disease when the colon is examined. IBS causes a great deal of discomfort and distress, but it does not cause permanent harm to the intestines and does not lead to intestinal bleeding or serious diseases such as cancer. Often IBS is just a mild annoyance, but for some people it can be disabling. They may be unable to go to social events, to work, or to travel even short distances. However, most people with IBS are able to control their symptoms through prescription medications, dietary changes, and stress management.

What Causes IBS?

The colon, also called the large intestine, connects the small intestine with the rectum and anus. The main function of the colon is to absorb water and salts from digested foods that enter from the small intestine. This digested material may remain there for several days until most of the fluid and salts are absorbed into the body. It is then moved through to the rectum, where it is stored until a bowel movement occurs.

Bowel movements are controlled by nerve signals, hormones and by naturally stimulated contractions in the colon muscle. A few times each day, strong muscle contractions move down the colon pushing digested material ahead of them. Some of these strong contractions result in a bowel movement.

Since a medical cause for IBS has not been identified, its cause has been attributed to emotional conflict or stress. While such factors may negatively impact IBS symptoms, research suggests that there are inherent differences between the colon of a healthy person and one belonging to a person suffering from IBS. For example, researchers have found that the colon muscle of a person with IBS begins to spasm after only mild stimulation. The colon muscle of a person with IBS seems to be more sensitive and reactive, so it responds strongly to sensations that would not bother most people. Ordinary events, such as eating and bloating from gas or other material in the colon can cause it to overreact in a person with IBS. Certain medicines and foods may trigger spasms, which can delay the passage of stool, leading to constipation. Researchers also have found that women with IBS may experience more or worsened symptoms during their menstrual periods, suggesting that hormones can increase IBS symptoms. See more under [How Do Diet and Stress Affect IBS?](#)

What Are the Symptoms of IBS?

If you are concerned about IBS, it is important to realize that normal bowel function varies from person to person. Normal bowel movements range from as many as three stools a day to as few as three a week. A normal bowel movement is one that is formed, but not hard, contains no blood, and is passed without discomfort. People with IBS usually have abdominal cramping with painful constipation or diarrhea. In some people, constipation and diarrhea may alternate. Sometimes people with IBS pass mucus with their bowel movements. Bleeding, fever, weight loss, and persistent severe pain are not symptoms of IBS but may indicate other problems.

How Is IBS Diagnosed?

IBS usually is diagnosed in patients after their physicians rule out other diseases. To determine the diagnosis, a doctor will take a complete medical history that includes a careful description of symptoms. A physical exam and laboratory tests will be done. A stool sample will be tested for signs of blood. A doctor also may do diagnostic procedures such as x-rays or endoscopy (viewing the colon through a flexible tube inserted through the anus) to detect disease.

How Do Diet and Stress Affect IBS?

People with IBS will always have a more sensitive, reactive colon, but symptoms will only occur as a result of specific triggers. The most common triggers are diet and emotional stress. Many people report that their symptoms occur after a meal, or when they are under stress. It is not clear why this happens, but scientists suspect it is related to the fact that eating causes contractions of the colon. For people without IBS this may cause an urge to have a bowel movement within 30 to 60 minutes after a meal. But for people with IBS, the urge may happen sooner along with cramping and diarrhea.

The intensity of the reaction is often related to how much is eaten and especially the amount of fat in a meal. Fat in any form (animal or vegetable) is a strong trigger of colon contractions. Many foods contain fat, especially meats of all kinds, poultry skin, whole milk, cream, cheese, butter, vegetable oil, margarine, shortening, avocados, and whipped toppings. Reducing fat intake can significantly decrease the amount and frequency of IBS symptoms. Chocolate, milk products, or large amounts of alcohol are frequent triggers that produce discomfort. Caffeine causes loose stools in many people, but it is more likely to affect those with IBS.

Stress also stimulates colon spasms in people with IBS. Though this process is not completely understood, it is believed to be related to the automatic reaction of the digestive organs when stress is experienced (the “fight or flight” response). Stress reduction (relaxation) practices, counseling and support help relieve IBS symptoms for some people.

How Does a Healthy Diet Help IBS?

For many people, eating healthy, non-triggering foods and beverages decreases IBS symptoms. Before changing your diet, it can be helpful to keep a journal of which foods seem to cause distress. Discuss your findings with your doctor. You also may want to consult a registered dietitian, who can help you make changes in your diet that are best suited to your needs. For example, if dairy products cause symptoms, you can try eating less of those foods. Yogurt might be better tolerated because it contains organisms that help break down the nutrients in milk products so they are more easily digested. Because dairy products are an important source of calcium and other nutrients that your body needs, be sure to get adequate nutrients in the foods that you substitute.

Dietary fiber may also help decrease IBS symptoms. Whole grain breads and cereals, beans, fruits, and vegetables are good sources of fiber. Consult your doctor before using an over-the-counter fiber supplement. Doctors usually recommend that you eat just enough fiber so that your bowel movements are soft, painless, and easily passed. High-fiber diets may cause gas and bloating, but within a few weeks, these symptoms often go away as your body adjusts to the changes.

Large meals can cause cramping and diarrhea in people with IBS. Symptoms may be eased if you eat smaller meals more often or just eat smaller portions. This should help, especially if your meals are low in fat and high in carbohydrates such as pasta, rice, whole-grain breads and cereals, fruits, and vegetables.

Can Medicines Relieve IBS Symptoms?

Your doctor may prescribe fiber supplements or occasional laxatives if you are constipated. Some doctors prescribe drugs that control colon muscle spasms, drugs that slow the movement of food through the digestive system, or tranquilizers, all of which may relieve symptoms. It is important to follow the physician's instructions when taking IBS medications, particularly laxatives, which can be habit forming if not used carefully.

Is IBS Linked to Other Diseases?

IBS has not been shown to lead to any serious diseases. No link has been established between IBS and inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. IBS does not lead to cancer. Some patients have a more severe form of IBS, and the pain and diarrhea may cause them to withdraw from normal activities. These patients need to work with their physicians to find the best combination of medicine, diet, counseling, and support to control their symptoms.

Resources

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