

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

What causes Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Muscles in the bowel ("colon" or "large intestine") seem to be hypersensitive (react too strongly) in people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome. This can make the intestines squeeze too hard or not hard enough, which causes food to move too fast or too slowly through your system.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome affects up to 20% of youths and adults. It does not cause damage to the intestines and it does not increase your chances of having another disease, such as a stomach ulcer or colon cancer. Although certain foods may be associated with more symptoms, irritable bowel syndrome is not caused by a food allergy.

What are the symptoms?

Pain

- may be caused by a spasm ("cramp") of the intestinal muscle, or by trapped gas
- may be either sharp and located in a particular area or dull and felt throughout the abdomen
- often occurs with looser and/or more frequent stools, and becomes less severe after a bowel movement

Changes in Bowel Habit

- constipation, diarrhea, or alternating cycles of constipation and diarrhea
- stools may be frequent and "ribbon-like" or infrequent and look like "rabbit pellets"
- there may be mucus (slime) with the stool
- there may be a feeling of incomplete "emptying" after a bowel movement

Bloating/Distention (Abdominal Swelling)

- may feel bloated and clothing may feel tight around the waist and abdomen, especially at the end of the day
- may also feel the need to belch ("burp") or pass gas ("fart")

Other Symptoms

- indigestion, nausea, dizziness, headaches, or sweating

Note: Bleeding, fever, weight loss, and severe pain that wakens you from sleep are not symptoms of IBS. If you develop these symptoms, contact your doctor.

What makes Irritable Bowel Syndrome worse?

Symptoms can vary from person to person, and over time. They may get worse when you travel or attend social events, when you change your daily routine, when you're under stress. Not eating the right foods or having a large meal may increase symptoms. Some people have diarrhea upon waking. Women who have IBS may notice symptoms during their menstrual periods.

Drugs that affect bowel activity (e.g., codeine, laxatives, and aspirin) also can make symptoms worse.

How is Irritable Bowel Syndrome Diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose Irritable Bowel Syndrome on the basis of your symptoms and how long you've had them. There

are no specific tests to confirm the diagnosis, but your doctor may suggest some tests to see if other bowel problems could be causing (or adding to) your symptoms.

How is Irritable Bowel Syndrome Treated?

Diet tips

1. Increase dietary fibre. Fibre increases the bulk of the stool, softens it, and stimulates the healthy movement of food through the intestines. There are two types of fibre:
Soluble fibre dissolves in liquid and helps both constipation and diarrhea. Oat bran and psyllium [a natural vegetable fibre in products such as Metamucil® and Fiberall®] are examples.
Insoluble fibre does not dissolve in liquid. It is helpful for constipation, but may make diarrhea worse. Fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals are examples.
2. Avoid foods high in fat or containing caffeine.
3. Drink plenty of water.
4. Try eating smaller meals with snacks, rather than 3 large meals a day.
5. If gas is a symptom, avoid gas-causing foods such as beans, cabbage and some fruits.
6. Don't cut out foods unless they have caused problems more than once.
7. Dairy products are usually O.K. If they cause symptoms, ask your doctor if you may be lactose-intolerant.

Reducing stress

Talk to your family doctor about ways to deal with stress, such as exercise, relaxation training, meditation or counselling. He or she may have some suggestions or refer you to someone who can help you.

Activity

20-30 minutes of exercise (such as brisk walking) daily is recommended.

Medication

Not many people need medication but your doctor may prescribe medication to treat severe constipation, diarrhea, or spasm. Laxatives should be avoided as they can weaken the intestines.

Sources: The College of Family Physicians of Canada in co-operation with the American Academy of Family Physicians; Medicine Plus, ICES "Gut Reaction"

For further information, check-out a small book entitled, I.B.S. Relief, written by D. Burstall, M. Vallis, and G. Turnbull (publisher is John Wiley & Sons; ISBN: 0471347418).

