

Common Gastrointestinal Problems

A Consumer Health Guide

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

What is it?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a cluster of symptoms, consisting most commonly of abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, and diarrhea. Some IBS patients experience alternating diarrhea and constipation. There may be mucus present around or within the stool.

IBS is best defined by what it is NOT!

- It is not an anatomical or structural defect.
- It is not an identifiable physical or chemical disorder.
- It is not a cancer and will not cause cancer.
- It will not cause other gastrointestinal diseases.

IBS is a functional disorder of the intestine. There is no sign of the disease that can be seen or measured, but the intestine is not functioning normally. It is common, occurring in about one in five Americans, more commonly in women, and more often at times of emotional stress. It usually begins in late adolescence or early adult life and rarely appears for the first time after the age of 50.

What can be done to help?

Visit a Doctor

Talking with your doctor about your problem is the first helpful step, because we all fear the unknown. Your doctor may order a series of tests to make sure there is no underlying disease that is the cause of your symptoms. If your doctor determines that you have IBS, there are measures to help you live with IBS and treat your symptoms. While the cause of IBS is not known, and there is no cure, there are several ways to manage the symptoms.

Reduce Stress

Try to reduce stress and conflict in your life. You may need to learn about relaxation techniques, participate in regular exercise or a hobby you enjoy, or attend counseling sessions to help control the stressful situations in your life.

Watch your Diet

Avoid or limit the amount of gas-producing foods such as beans, onions, broccoli, cabbage, or any other foods that you know will commonly aggravate your IBS symptoms. Try to slow down and enjoy your food at mealtimes to prevent swallowing too much air. Chewing gum may lead to swallowing air. Drinking carbonated drinks (colas, pop, soda) can introduce gas into the intestines and cause abdominal pain. Avoid skipping meals or overloading at one sitting. Intolerance to milk sugar, *lactose*, is seen in up to 40 percent of patients with IBS. Avoiding dairy products may be very helpful in reducing symptoms of IBS. The addition of wheat bran or other fiber may be suggested by your doctor in an attempt to decrease your symptoms. Whatever changes you make in your diet, do it gradually to give your body time to adjust.

Medications

Medications can decrease your symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Fiber supplements may be used for control of diarrhea or constipation. Laxatives may be prescribed for constipation. If you have diarrhea, your doctor may prescribe drugs to decrease the number of bowel movements. In patients with abdominal pain, drugs which relieve spasm or tranquilizers may be prescribed to relieve symptoms. Antidepressant and mood elevating drugs may also be helpful.

Remember, IBS is not life-threatening and will not lead to other serious diseases. Most patients can be helped if they work with and follow the recommendations of their doctors.