

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder that affects the large intestine (colon). Although symptoms are uncomfortable, IBS doesn't cause changes in bowel tissue or increase your risk of colorectal cancer.

SYMPTOMS OF IBS

Signs and symptoms of IBS can vary widely from person to person and can vary from day to day. The most common symptoms are:

- Abdominal pain and/or cramping
- Bloating feeling and/or increased gas
- Diarrhea and/or constipation—sometimes alternating
- Mucous in the stool

Symptoms often worsen during periods of stress or emotional upset. Stress doesn't cause IBS but many people find that symptoms are more frequent or more severe during periods of stress. Some people are sensitive to dietary changes which can exacerbate IBS symptoms.

Symptoms that can indicate a more serious condition other than IBS and need further evaluation:

- Rectal bleeding
- Abdominal pain that is worsening, is localized or wakes you up from sleep
- Weight loss

WHAT CAUSES IBS?

The exact cause of irritable bowel syndrome is not known but a variety of factors play a role. The walls of the intestines are lined with layers of muscle that contract and relax in a coordinated rhythm as food is moved from your stomach through your intestinal tract to your rectum. With IBS, the contractions may be stronger and last longer than normal, causing gas, bloating or diarrhea. Or the opposite may occur, with weak intestinal contractions slowing food passage and leading to constipation. Poorly coordinated signals between the brain and the intestine can make your body overreact to the changes that normally occur in the digestive process. Some people have more of an exaggerated stress response than other people; and neurobiologically are just more hard-wired to have more of a stress response compared to others. IBS has multi-factorial causes and

research is ongoing to better understand IBS.

Increased incidence:

- In females—2X the incidence compared to men. Symptoms may be worse prior to menses.
- Family history of IBS—may be related genes or shared factors in a family's environment or both.
- Anxiety, depression, personality disorder or any history of any childhood abuse.

TREATMENT

Treatment of IBS involves education, achievement of a healthier lifestyle, and occasional medication use.

- Sleep and Exercise: Stress can be a major factor in aggravating IBS. Getting at least 7 hours of sleep and trying to keep the same sleep schedule on the weekend as during the week is important. Exercise is key for stress management. Exercise helps to burn off some of the stress mediators and release neurotransmitters that modulate mood and feelings of well-being. Exercise stimulates normal contractions of the intestine.
- Counseling: Making an appointment at Cook Counseling or with a counselor in the community is helpful if stress is reaching the point that it is affecting your health, ability to sleep and study, and is interfering with personal relationships. Turning off electronic devices and freeing your mind from constant sensory input is also helpful for stress relief.
- Diet: Certain foods will aggravate IBS in some people, however the same foods may aggravate you one week but not the next. Foods that may cause cramping and diarrhea are red meats, fried foods, chocolate, caffeine, alcohol and artificial sweeteners. Foods that may cause gas and bloating are beans, cabbage, green peppers, cauliflower, and broccoli. It is frustrating when foods listed on "healthy diet" lists can cause IBS symptoms; but to feel better, you may have to eliminate any foods that aggravate your symptoms. Some people are sensitive to fructose and lactose, called FODMAPS (fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides, and polyols). See the links listed at end of this handout for more specific information.

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Eating at regular times is important. Some people with diarrhea find that eating small amounts at a time at more frequent intervals helps.

- Drink plenty of water: Carbonated drinks can produce gas. Alcohol and caffeinated beverages can stimulate our intestines and make diarrhea worse. Not drinking enough water can lead to constipation.
- Fiber: Fiber can be a mixed blessing. Although it helps reduce constipation, it can also increase gas and cramping. The best approach is to slowly increase the amount of fiber in your diet over a period of weeks. Some people do better limiting their dietary fiber and instead take a fiber supplement. There are many products available. Remember to introduce fiber slowly and drink plenty of water.
- Biofeedback techniques, relaxation exercises, deep breathing and mindfulness training are some stress relieving modalities. Speak with a counselor or check these out online for more details.

MEDICATIONS

Medication is best used in IBS for patients with moderate to severe symptoms who do not have improvement after strictly adhering to lifestyle modifications with sleep, exercise, diet, and stress relief. Over the counter Immodium® can help with diarrhea. However, if you are having to take it frequently, symptoms are worsening, or you have a lot of pain, it is best to see a healthcare provider to determine best course of treatment or if another diagnosis needs to be considered. Bentyl® is a prescription antispasmodic that can help with cramping. Other medications are available for more severe cases, for which Schiffert Health providers may refer you to a gastroenterologist for further evaluation.

Websites for more information:

www.iffgd.org

www.uptodate.com/patients/info

www.aboutIBS.org