



Irritable Bowel Syndrome

What is it?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a very common gastrointestinal condition that is diagnosed when a person has any of a variety of abdominal symptoms and/or a change in bowel habits in the absence of detectable organic pathology. It has been called a number of different names including "Spastic Colon." Some individuals with IBS have abnormal sensations in their abdominal organs. It usually occurs in people who are between the ages of 20 and 50. It is seen in both sexes but is more common in women. It can be a chronic condition which tends to come and go over one's lifetime. Although it causes varying degrees of discomfort and inconvenient symptoms, it does not progress to any other diseases or cancer.

What Causes IBS?

IBS may be due to a variety of factors such as stress, diet, or hormones. Studies have shown that people with IBS may have changes in the way their intestinal muscles move food and liquid through the digestive tract.

What are Symptoms?

Individuals with IBS may have some of the following symptoms:

- Change in the frequency of bowel movements from what is normal for the person ("normal" bowel movements are highly individual and range from 3 times a day to 3 times a week.)
- Diarrhea, constipation, or alternating diarrhea and constipation.
- Abdominal pain or discomfort which is often relieved by having a bowel movement.
- Rectal pain or sensation of incomplete evacuation after having a bowel movement.
- Increased abdominal bloating and/or gas.
- Occasionally, painless diarrhea.

These symptoms may be associated with nausea, heartburn, headache, fatigue, anxiety, or depression. Factors such as stress may play an important role; some people can learn to recognize when their IBS is likely to "act up."

The following are not symptoms of IBS and should be reported immediately to your health care practitioner:

- Being awakened from your sleep by abdominal pain or diarrhea
- Fever, chills
- Blood in stool

How do I get tested for IBS?

The diagnosis of IBS is made after your health care practitioner reviews your medical history and does a physical examination. As indicated, additional blood and/or stool tests may be done.

Your medical history and description of symptoms is the most important part of the evaluation of IBS, since the physical exam and laboratory tests are usually entirely normal.

Your diet, especially regarding fiber, fat, lactose, gas-forming foods, caffeine, and alcohol intake, is important to consider. Also, drug use--including prescription and over-the-counter medications as well as recreational drugs--must be considered.

Symptoms similar to irritable bowel syndrome may be caused by lactose intolerance. This is the body's inability to digest lactose, a disaccharide found in milk products, which is frequently acquired as people get older. To test for this, you may be advised to eliminate milk products from your diet for 2 weeks to determine if your symptoms improve without lactose.

What is the Treatment for IBS?

Treatment may include counseling, dietary changes, and medications. There is no cure for IBS, but many things can be suggested to lessen the severity and frequency of symptoms.

1. Stress reduction

- Stress reduction techniques are often very useful for those individuals who note an association between their irritable bowel symptoms and stress.
- Both the University of Oregon Counseling Center and the Health Education department in the Student Health Center can teach you stress reduction techniques.
- Exercise may reduce symptoms of IBS.

2. Diet

- Increase fiber content in your diet (see "Fiber in Your Diet" handout).
- Decrease fat intake.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and sorbitol (a sweetener found in chewing gum).
- Avoiding gas-forming foods from the cruciferous vegetable family (cabbage, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, radishes, turnips), beans, and legumes may help.
- Avoid large meals - smaller, more frequent meals may reduce symptoms.

3. Medications

- If diarrhea is a prominent symptoms of IBS, an antidiarrheal medication may be recommended by your health care practitioner.
- If pain, gas, or bloating are prominent symptoms, an antispasmodic medication may be prescribed.
- Antidepressants are sometimes used for chronic pain problems.