Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome is a common disorder of the large and small intestines that leads to abdominal 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 and there is no cure. Doctors call it a "functional disorder" because there is no sign of disease when the colon (large intestine) is examined. The symptoms of IBS are thought to be related to abnormal muscle contractions in parts of the intestines. IBS causes a great deal of discomfort and distress, but it does not cause permanent harm to the intestines and it does not lead to intestinal bleeding or to a serious disease 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, a job or even travel short distances. Most people with IBS, however, are able to control their symptoms through medications prescribed by their physicians, diet and stress management.

What are the symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

The symptoms may get worse when you're under stress, such as when you travel, attend social events or change your daily routine. Your symptoms may also get worse if you don't eat right or after you've eaten a big meal. Some people are bothered by certain foods. Women who have IBS may notice symptoms during their menstrual periods.

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If you're 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 movement is one that is formed but not hard, contains no blood and is passed without cramps or pain.

How is IBS diagnosed?

IBS is usually diagnosed after doctors exclude the presence of disease and can usually can be diagnosed mainly from symptoms. In most cases, only minimal tests are needed. A health professional diagnoses IBS when a person has the typical symptoms of the disorder and routine tests, if needed, have ruled out other possible causes.

The amount of testing that may be done depends on several factors: age, how the symptoms start and how severe they are, and how the person responds to the initial treatment.

Why is diet important to people with IBS?

In order for abnormal functioning of the colon to occur, a trigger must be present to cause symptoms. One of the most common triggers seems to be diet. Many people report that their symptoms occur following a meal.

The symptoms are often related to the number of calories in a meal and especially the amount of fat in a meal. Many people find that their diarrhea is reduced if they limit or eliminate the following foods and beverages:

- Alcohol
- Caffeine (coffee, tea, cola drinks and chocolate)
- Nicotine
- Gas-producing foods (such as beans, broccoli, cabbage and apples)
- Dairy products that contain lactose (milk, sugar)
- Spicy foods
- Foods high in acid, such as citrus fruit
- Foods high in fat, including bacon, sausage, butter, oils and anything deep-fried
- Sorbitol, an artificial sweetener found in some sugarless candies and chewing gum

No particular foods cause everyone with IBS to have symptoms. Doctors do not advocate a particular diet to manage symptoms. But through trial and error, many people find that they feel better when they stop eating certain foods.

Can medications help relieve the symptoms of IBS?

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, tranquilizers or antidepressant drugs, 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.

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