



# Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is caused by a disturbance of normal bowel function. It is not caused by a structural abnormality and does not require surgery. Although there is no cure for IBS, with proper diet, reduced stress, and proper medication, you will find that your symptoms will gradually disappear, or at least become more tolerable.

IBS is probably the most common digestive disorder seen in medical practice. It is believed that some twenty-two million Americans are affected by IBS. For unknown reasons, IBS usually appears in late adolescence or early adulthood, and women seem to develop it twice as often as men. You may have heard the terms spastic colon, mucous colitis, irritable colon and functional bowel syndrome used to describe this condition. None of these terms, however, has any special meaning.

## ORIGINS OF IBS

After food has been digested and absorbed in the small intestine, the waste material is propelled into the large intestine, or colon. In the colon, water and salts are removed from the undigested products coming from the small intestine, and the remaining residue, or fecal material, is held for eventual elimination.

Under normal circumstances, gentle, rhythmic contractions on the bowel walls push the fecal material along the five-foot length of the colon toward the rectum. In IBS, however, these contractions are irregular and poorly coordinated, so that the fecal material is either retained too long (resulting in constipation) or expelled too soon (producing diarrhea).

## TYPICAL SYMPTOMS

The most common symptom of IBS is pain, usually in the lower left side of the abdomen. The pain results from excessive bowel-muscle spasms and the buildup of gas and fecal material in the colon. The pain can range from sharp abdominal cramps to a dull-continuous ache and usually worsens soon after eating. It is typically relieved by defecation or the passage of gas. IBS pain may also occur on the right side of the abdomen or higher up, or may be felt as

heartburn, backache, or as a dull pain in the arm or shoulders.

Abdominal pain is usually accompanied by constipation. If the fecal material is held in the colon too long by cramping, excessive amounts of water may be absorbed. This causes the feces to become dry and hard. After a few days, a hard stool is produced, followed by several softer stools.

The disturbance in bowel function that characterizes IBS may also produce diarrhea. The diarrhea typically occurs immediately after a meal or upon arising in the morning and is accompanied by a strong urge to defecate. The stools are typically soft and watery and are often flecked with mucus. The mucus is clear, thick, and slightly sticky looking. Occasionally, a few drops of fresh blood may be noticed in the stool, and this is usually a result of rectal irritation.

Other symptoms of IBS include bloating, heartburn, gas, loss of appetite, nausea, and (rarely) vomiting.



## PREVENTION

The symptoms of IBS can be managed or prevented by following these recommendations:

### Diet

Avoid foods that are high in fats, oils, or spice, gas-producing, caffeinated, carbonated, or containing alcohol. Many fast foods such as french fries and hamburgers are very high in fat. If diarrhea is a major problem, stay away from foods that have a laxative effect, such as fruit, fruit juice, dairy products, and coffee.

Too much fiber in the diet should be avoided. Eliminating gas-producing vegetables such as beans, broccoli, cabbage, onions, green peppers and cucumbers will help relieve bloating, belching, and gas. Eliminating carbonated drinks will also help.

Fiber sources should be chosen wisely so as not to produce bloating and gas. Some individuals benefit from raw bran. Psyllium fiber such as "Metamucil" is another option. Always drink plenty of water, preferably 6-8 eight-ounce glasses daily. Keep a food diary recording of what, when, where, and with whom you eat and when you experience IBS symptoms. Your objective is to identify which foods and stressors irritate your colon, and then eliminate them from your diet.

### Stress

Anxiety, stress, and tension seem to trigger or worsen the symptoms of IBS. The more you can do to avoid stressful or emotional situations, the less you may be bothered by IBS.

### Exercise

Exercise promotes smooth motility of the bowel and also helps to relieve tension. Develop an exercise program that you maintain on a weekly basis. Choose exercise that you enjoy and that fits into your class and work schedule.

### Daily Life

Get plenty of rest and sleep. Establish a regular daily schedule of meals, exercise, school work and studies.

Eat several small meals regularly spaced throughout the day. Chew food slowly to avoid gulping air.

If you smoke, stop. Nicotine can cause the stomach to produce more acid.

Take time to relax, or when that is not possible, use quick stress reduction techniques such as deep breathing visualization, and time-outs.

### Medications

Your health care provider may prescribe a medication to relieve bowel spasms, abdominal pain, or constipation. Laxatives will relieve constipation, while antispasmodics relieve intestinal cramps. Be sure to follow the regimen prescribed by your health care provider and call if you experience any side effects.



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