

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a very common gastrointestinal (gut) disorder that results in abdominal pain and changes in bowel habits. The cause of IBS is unknown, but it seems to be related to an oversensitive digestive tract. Changes to diet and lifestyle and some medicines can help relieve IBS symptoms.

Although IBS can be uncomfortable or upsetting, it does not damage the bowel and does not lead to other bowel diseases. It can affect anyone at any age, but often starts in late teenage years or early adulthood.

Signs and symptoms

IBS symptoms vary widely from person to person and include:

- Pain or cramping in the abdomen, often relieved by passing wind or a bowel motion
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Feeling as though the bowel has not emptied properly after passing a bowel motion
- Feeling full or bloated

- Passing a lot of wind
- Mucus in bowel motions.

IBS can cause mainly constipation, mainly diarrhoea or alternating bouts of constipation and diarrhoea.

Most people have mild symptoms that come and go, but sometimes IBS symptoms can be severe and constant and interfere with daily activities.

IBS is more common in women than men and many women find their symptoms get worse during or around their menstrual period.

Causes

The exact cause of IBS is not known, but it may involve a change in the function of nerves and muscles in the

gastrointestinal tract (gut).

The symptoms of IBS seem to be related to the sensitivity of the muscles that move food through the gut. A tendency to IBS may be inherited.

Triggers

Things that can trigger or worsen IBS symptoms include:

Stress – such as stressful emotions (e.g., anger, fear) and events. Worrying about the symptoms of IBS can make the symptoms worse. Some people with IBS have anxiety or depression and treatment of these conditions can relieve the symptoms of IBS

Food and drinks – Eating can make symptoms worse, as it stimulates gut muscles. Some people also find specific foods and drinks make their symptoms worse (e.g., fatty foods, spicy foods, foods that cause gas/bloating, dairy products, alcohol, caffeine, some fruits and some sweeteners such as fructose and sorbitol)

Gut infections – For example, gastroenteritis (gastro) or bowel infections

Medicines – Some medicines can worsen constipation (e.g., iron tablets, codeine, some antidepressants). Some medicines can worsen diarrhoea (e.g., laxatives, some antibiotics, some antidepressants). Ask a pharmacist.

Testing for IBS

The symptoms of IBS can also be symptoms of other gut problems and a doctor can organise tests to investigate the cause of the symptoms. These tests may include a full medical check, blood tests, testing faeces (bowel motions) and viewing the inside of the bowel by sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy.

Self care

There is no cure for IBS and managing IBS involves managing the triggers and treating the symptoms. It can take time to find the best way to relieve symptoms and, in some cases, symptoms can be reduced but not completely stopped.

- Try to identify and avoid IBS triggers – keep a record of your symptoms for several weeks, noting when they occur; what you were doing, eating and drinking before they started; how you were feeling at the time and any medicines you were taking.
- Reduce caffeine intake (tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks).
- Reduce intake of alcohol and fizzy drinks.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Take time to eat slowly and don't miss meals.
- Try slowly changing the amount of fibre in your diet (e.g., a high fibre diet may help relieve constipation).

- Drink more water to help prevent constipation. Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week to help prevent constipation and relieve stress, and for heart health.
- Don't smoke.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress.

A doctor or pharmacist can help you develop a plan to manage your IBS symptoms.

Treatments

Treatments that may help relieve symptoms of IBS include counselling and psychological therapies (e.g., cognitive behaviour therapy), diet and lifestyle changes and some medicines.

Medicines that may help relieve IBS symptoms include:

- Medicines that relax gut muscles (e.g., peppermint oil, mebeverine, hyoscine) may relieve abdominal pain and sometimes diarrhoea
- Some antidepressant medicines may relieve abdominal pain
- Certain anti-diarrhoea medicines (e.g., loperamide, cholestyramine) may relieve diarrhoea
- Regular fibre supplements can relieve constipation and sometimes diarrhoea

Important

Consult your doctor promptly if you have:

- A constant change in your bowel habit
- Blood in your bowel motions or from your rectum
- Unexplained loss of weight or appetite
- Diarrhoea at night
- Constant or severe abdominal pain or pain waking you at night.

or if you have IBS symptoms and:

- Are over 40 years or under 16 years of age
- A fever
- Vomiting
- Repeated mouth ulcers
- Have had bowel cancer or polyps
- A family history of bowel cancer, coeliac disease or inflammatory bowel disease.

- Certain laxatives may help relieve constipation, although usually they are not helpful in IBS
- Complementary and probiotic ('good bacteria') medicines may help relieve some symptoms.

Some medicines for IBS are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

For more information

The Gastroenterological Society of Australia

Phone: (02) 9256 5454

Website: www.gesa.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: