

Living with IBS – Irritable Bowel Syndrome

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Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is one of the most common disorders a physician encounters in everyday practice.

Also called “irritable bowel”, “irritable colon” or “spastic colon”, IBS is a common condition that affects one in five adult Americans, the majority of whom are women. This condition most often occurs in people from late teens to early 40’s.

IBS is, in essence, a combination of abdominal discomfort or pain and changes in bowel habits (changes in frequency or form).

Some of the signs and symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome are:

- Abdominal cramping
- Bloating
- Gas
- Diarrhea
- Constipation

Most people find their signs and symptoms improve as they learn to control the condition. Only a very small percentage of people with IBS have severe signs and symptoms.

The exact cause is unknown. The inner walls of the intestine are lined with layers of muscle that contract and relax as they move food from your stomach, through your intestinal tract to the rectum. Under normal conditions, these muscles contract and relax in a smooth, synchronized pattern.

But with IBS, the contractions may be stronger and last longer than normal, forcing your food through the intestines too quickly. This results in gas, bloating and diarrhea. In some cases, the contractions are weaker and quicker. In these cases, the passage of food slows and the stools become hard and dry.

Some researchers feel that hormone changes play a part in IBS. Many women find the signs and symptoms worsen around their menstrual period.

Since scientists are unclear on what exactly causes IBS, treatment is typically confined to relief of the symptoms.

In most cases, learning to manage stress and making lifestyle changes will successfully control IBS. If your problem is moderate or severe, you may need more than just lifestyle changes.

Your doctor may recommend taking a fiber supplement. Fiber is helpful because it improves how the intestines work. Whenever using fiber to lessen IBS symptoms, make sure you drink plenty of water.

There are two types of fiber:

Soluble fiber - helps both diarrhea and constipation. It dissolves in water and forms a gel-like material. Psyllium, a natural vegetable fiber, is the fiber most commonly recommended by doctors for IBS.

Insoluble fiber - helps with constipation by adding bulk to the stool, thus moving hard waste material through your colon. Whole grain breads, wheat bran and many vegetables contain insoluble fiber.

You doctor may also prescribe anti-diarrheal medication, medications for the nervous system (an anti-cholinergic, to relieve painful bowel spasms) or recommend cutting out foods such as carbonated drinks, raw fruits and raw vegetables. Sometimes anti-depressant medications help.

A non-traditional therapy that complements fiber supplementation is probiotics. Probiotics are the “good” bacteria that reside in our intestines. Some studies have shown that probiotics can decrease problems caused by IBS.

While IBS can be a chronic problem, it is not a life-threatening condition, nor does it cause inflammation or changes in the bowel tissue. IBS does not make a person more likely to develop other colon conditions, such as ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease or colon cancer.

IBS can however, impair the quality of life for those who are diagnosed with it. For example, people with IBS miss work three times more than people without it, and it’s been associated with absenteeism from school and changing either one’s work schedule or location (or even giving up work altogether).