

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) has a variety of symptoms, most commonly cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, and diarrhea. Symptoms can vary from person to person and may alternate between diarrhea and constipation. IBS causes discomfort and often is upsetting, but it does not harm the intestines or lead to diseases such as cancer.

Causes of IBS

Experts do not know what causes IBS. Stress, diet, drugs, or hormones may aggravate gastrointestinal (GI) problems. The body's immune system, which helps fight infection, may also contribute to IBS. Some think that increased levels of serotonin, a normal chemical that is found in the GI tract, is involved. Some researchers think that those with IBS have a large intestine that is more sensitive to certain foods or stress, which causes more of a reaction to stressors or certain foods than others. In these people, stress may trigger colon spasms.

Tests to diagnose IBS

Unfortunately, a good way to diagnose IBS does not exist. Tests can help rule out other problems, with diagnosis usually based on these results and a careful review of the type and frequency of symptoms.

Foods to avoid with IBS

Changing your diet might help improve your IBS symptoms. Having a well-balanced diet, eating regular meals, and drinking plenty of fluids is important in order to keep your digestive system moving. Foods that might cause problems vary from person to person, but some foods might make your IBS worse. You might find it helpful to avoid foods that cause gas or flatulence, including:

- Fatty meats
- Whole milk
- Whole-milk cheeses
- Fatty desserts
- Broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- Cabbage
- Cauliflower
- Corn
- Onions

In some people, sweeteners, such as fructose or sorbitol, or use of alcohol or caffeine can make IBS symptoms worse.

Tolerance to specific foods is very individualized. Keeping a food diary can help you decide if any specific foods are causing symptoms. You do not need to completely avoid certain foods or groups of foods, unless you are able to link them with your IBS symptoms. A registered dietitian can review your food diary and help you identify foods that might make your symptoms worse.

Foods that can help IBS

Certain foods can possibly help those suffering from IBS. A diet high in fiber seems to help with IBS symptoms. Experts recommend 25-35 grams of fiber/day. Good sources of fiber include:

- Most fruits and vegetables (remember you might need to avoid the vegetables listed under *Foods to Avoid*)
- Dried beans, such as pinto beans and black-eyed peas
- Whole-grain breads and cereals

Some experts think probiotics (live microorganisms found in certain foods) can help with symptoms, but some debate still exists about whether they are effective or not.

Probiotics

Probiotics are available for sale in the form of dietary supplements and foods. Examples of foods containing probiotics include yogurt, miso, tempeh, and some juices and soy drinks. Many different types of probiotics exist, and as a result, it is difficult to determine which ones, if any, are beneficial to digestive health. Not enough evidence is available to say for sure that probiotics help, but they probably will not hurt, especially when you eat foods such as yogurt.

Medicines for IBS

Medicines often are used to help with IBS symptoms. Your doctor may suggest fiber supplements for constipation or laxatives for diarrhea. Sometimes an antispasmodic medicine will help reduce pain in the abdomen. One medicine, Lotronex[®], is approved to treat IBS, but is used cautiously because of serious side effects.

Other treatments

If you feel stressed frequently and have IBS, stress management may help your symptoms. Examples of stress management include:

- Relaxation training and therapy
- Counseling and support
- Regular exercise
- Adequate sleep
- Removing stressful situations from your life, if possible.

References

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