



IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) affects around 20% of the population. People with IBS appear to have an oversensitive bowel, commonly causing pain in the gut and irregular bowel movements (diarrhoea, constipation or both). Symptoms often come and go without any pattern and may continue over many years. The cause of IBS is unknown, however it may be possible to find and avoid factors that bring on the symptoms or make them worse. IBS does not lead to more serious conditions like bowel cancer but it can make some people very uncomfortable, anxious and distressed, affecting their work and day-to-day activities. IBS is a leading cause of days lost from work due to illness.

Symptoms

The main symptoms that suggest IBS include:

- Colic-type pains in the gut, often relieved by passing wind or a bowel motion
- Diarrhoea or constipation, or one then the other
- A strong urge to pass a bowel motion
- Feeling as though the bowel has not emptied properly after passing a bowel motion
- Feeling full or bloated
- Wind
- Mucus in bowel motions.

These come and go.

Symptoms of other gut problems sometimes occur with IBS, including heartburn, nausea, indigestion or burping. Some people also feel tired, have a backache or headache or feel a strong urge to pass urine.

What causes IBS symptoms

IBS appears to be a disorder in the way the bowel works. In IBS, muscle contractions in the intestines may be:

- Faster than normal, resulting in diarrhoea
- Slower than normal, causing constipation.

It is thought that if the muscle contractions are strong and sudden (a 'spasm'), they may cause pain.

Trigger factors

Stress

- Can make symptoms worse and may be a cause of IBS in some people.

Food and drinks

- Food in general may make symptoms worse as it stimulates the bowel
- While no specific food has been linked to IBS, some people find certain foods make their symptoms worse e.g. fatty foods, dairy products (lactose)
- Alcohol and drinks containing caffeine may worsen IBS symptoms.

Gut infections

- Gastroenteritis or bowel infections can trigger IBS in some people
- There is no scientific evidence that candida (see *Thrush* Fact Card) causes IBS symptoms.

Important

See your doctor straight away if you also have

- Blood in your bowel motions
- A fever
- Loss of weight or appetite
- Constant pain, or gut pain waking you at night
- Had bowel cancer or polyps
- A family history of bowel cancer
- Any new symptoms or a change in your existing condition

You should also see your doctor if you are over 40 years of age and have IBS symptoms.

Medicines

- Constipation in IBS can be worsened by some medicines e.g. iron tablets, codeine-containing medicines, aluminium-containing antacids and some prescription medicines. (Ask your pharmacist.)
- Other medicines can worsen diarrhoea e.g. laxatives, some antibiotics, some antidepressants etc. (Ask your pharmacist.)

Testing for IBS

Your doctor will take a careful history from you and may organise tests to make sure you do not have another condition causing your symptoms.

IBS symptoms often improve over time, particularly once you have the peace of mind that you do not have a serious illness.

Self care

It can take time to find the best way to relieve your particular symptoms and, in some cases, the symptoms can be reduced but not completely relieved.

IBS presents with many symptoms and different cures have been suggested, often without evidence that they work. Although there is no cure for IBS, symptoms come and go. In some people, symptoms may be reduced by identifying and managing trigger factors.

Try keeping a record for several weeks, noting:

- When you have symptoms and what you were doing before they started
- What you were eating and drinking before the symptoms began
- How you were feeling at the time e.g. stressed
- Any medicines you were taking

Show the record to your doctor and pharmacist. They may help you find triggers and develop a plan to manage your IBS symptoms.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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Managing IBS involves treating the symptoms:

Constipation

- Read the *Constipation* Fact Card
- Drink more water
- Gradually increasing fibre in your diet may help (see *Fibre & Bowel Health* Fact Card)
- If you are constipated, laxatives may help, although they generally have a limited role in IBS - ask your pharmacist.

There is a new prescription medicine for constipation-predominant IBS (see your doctor).

Diarrhoea

- Antidiarrhoea medicines decrease bowel activity; some are better and more suitable than others - ask your pharmacist.

Pain and 'spasm'

- Reducing tea and coffee intake may help
- Specially coated peppermint oil capsules may reduce wind, bloating and spasm in the bowel - ask your pharmacist
- Other specialised antispasm medicines may also help - ask your pharmacist and doctor
- Relaxation may also help. (see *Relaxation Techniques* Fact Card)

Recommended reading:

Irritable Bowel Syndrome
The Gut Foundation 2000

Other relevant fact cards

- *Constipation*
- *Fibre & Bowel Health*
- *Thrush*
- *Anxiety*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

Contact

A doctor - listed under Medical Practitioners in the yellow pages of the phone book

Irritable Bowel Information and Support Association Inc. - ph. 1300 651 131

The Gut Foundation - ph (02) 9382 2749
www.gut.nsw.edu.au

Your Self Care pharmacist. To find: (02) 6283 4777

In case of poisoning, phone the **Poisons Information Centre** on 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

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

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Natural relief of symptoms of IBS

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