

The information in this leaflet is not intended to replace the knowledge or diagnosis of a qualified health practitioner. We encourage you to consult a health professional and ensure your IBS is properly diagnosed. You should also seek further assistance if your symptoms change.

Sources:-

No More IBS! – Maryon Stewart & Dr Alan Stewart  
Coping successfully with your irritable bowel – Rosemary Nicol

Leaflet produced by:-

The Health Shop, 31 High Street,  
Madeley, Telford. TF7 5AR.  
Tel: 01952 582659

2003.

Reviewed 2007 –March 2008

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome



## What Is Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

IBS is a common problem affecting the intestines. You may also have heard it called colitis, spastic colon, spastic bowel, or functional bowel disease. You can have many different symptoms and these can change, improve or maybe even disappear for a while, but, as IBS is a syndrome and not a disease, there is no cure for it. Therefore unfortunately, it will probably occur periodically throughout your life. IBS is classed as a “relapsing and remitting condition” (which means it come and goes).

A lot of people suffer from IBS and it is roughly equally as common in women and men. The average age of onset is late teens to early twenties, but people can be afflicted in childhood.

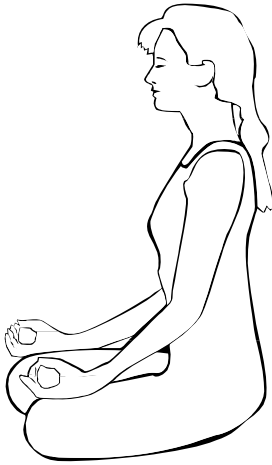
It is generally characterized by a collection of symptoms:- crampy abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, diarrhoea or alternating constipation and diarrhoea, rumbling noises in your stomach, excessive wind, urgency – a need to rush and open the bowels, a sensation of incomplete bowel movement and even passing mucus with a bowel movement.

Eat bran cereal for breakfast. But start slowly. Many people notice bloating, cramping or gas when they add fibre to their diet. Making small changes in your diet over a period of time can help prevent this.



If you suffer from diarrhoea or you increase your fibre intake, it is important to drink more fluids to prevent dehydration. Drink at least 8 glasses of water a day. Drinking carbonated beverages may result in gas and cause discomfort. It is also important to avoid cigarettes as tobacco wreaks havoc on the digestive tract.

Large meals can cause cramping and diarrhoea, so eating smaller meals more often or eating smaller portions should help.



**Get advice and support:**

Your pharmacist or GP can help you with advice on medications.

**Diet:**

Diet alone can alleviate more than 90% of the misery of IBS.

Increasing your fibre intake may help if you suffer from constipation, however it may not help ease pain or diarrhoea.

Eat at least 5 servings of fresh fruit and vegetables each day. Replace white bread with whole-grain breads with cereal. Eat brown rice instead of white.

These symptoms are first and foremost, however, you may experience associated symptoms in other parts of the body such as headache, backache, nausea, passing urine frequently and largely, tiredness, a feeling of lethargy and low energy levels.

IBS is nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about. As bowel movements and related issues are so little talked about in our society, many people suffer discomfort, distress and embarrassment in silence. This is a shame as we all have bowel movements and the way our bowels function is a contributing factor to our overall health.

Often IBS is just a mild annoyance but for some people it can be disabling. They may be unable to go to social events, to go to work or even to travel short distances. Most people however are able to control their symptoms through medications prescribed by their doctor, diet and stress management.

IBS causes a great deal of discomfort and distress, but it does not cause permanent harm to the intestines and has not been shown to lead to any other syndrome or disease.

No link has been established between IBS and inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn's or ulcerative colitis and does not lead to intestinal bleeding of the bowel or to a serious disease such as cancer.

IBS itself is not a disease; it is a syndrome – a combination of signs and symptoms.

If you find that eating a certain food triggers or promotes an attack, you may find it helpful to keep a food diary listing what you ate that day and how you felt afterwards.



**Exercise:**

Keep yourself as active as possible. Exercise reduces tension and stress and some people find that exercise can help relieve constipation.

**Avoid stress:**

This may be easier said than done but sometimes a radical overhaul of your lifestyle may be necessary to help you avoid excessive stress and manage your IBS. You might like to experiment with different forms of relaxation techniques, such as meditation.

Some people may find help from practitioners of complementary medicine such as acupuncturists, homeopaths, herbalists etc.

### **What can I do to help myself?**

#### **Diet:**

Eat a sensible, balanced diet. If you suspect you have a food intolerance, seek help from a nutritionist (your doctor will be able to help you find one). Some people benefit from reducing sugar and fats in their diet, it may also be useful to keep to strict meal and toilet times to regulate the bowel.

Peppermint in tea and oils and Aloe Vera is said to have a calming effect on the digestive tract and so may also be of help. Try also to drink at least 8 glasses of water a day, especially if you suffer from constipation.

### **What Are The Causes Of IBS?**

Though diet is the most easily addressed cause of IBS, stress is also a common trigger and can exacerbate attacks, as emotional states can affect the function of the digestive tract. About half of all patients will date the onset of their symptoms to a major life event, such as change of house or job or bereavement. Other tell-tale signs of anxiety and stress are common in those with the condition and IBS is a symptom of depression in some people.

In people with IBS, stress and emotions can strongly affect the colon. It has many nerves that connect it to the brain and research has suggested that people with IBS seem to have a colon that is more sensitive and reactive than usual to a variety of things. It's possible the normal motions of the colon are not working properly. It can go into spasm (sudden strong muscle contractions that come and go) or can even stop temporarily.

Stress – feeling mentally or emotionally tense, troubled, angry or overwhelmed – stimulates colon spasms in people with IBS. The colon has a vast supply of nerves that connect it to the brain. These nerves control the normal rhythmic contractions of the colon and cause abdominal discomfort at stressful times.

With IBS the colon can be overly responsive to even slight conflict or stress. Therefore, stress management is an important part of treatment for IBS.



The nature of the diet, eating habits and lifestyle also influence the way the bowel functions. Too much, or too little, dietary fibre, too much fat, or a very rich diet or spicy diet may all upset the working of the bowel and trigger the symptoms of IBS.

Alcohol, tea, coffee and smoking can all act as stimulants to the bowel and provoke an attack. For some people, certain foods have the same effect. However, often there is no one factor or cause.

You may be suffering from food intolerance. Common intolerances are dairy products, wheat, caffeine, chocolate, alcohol, citrus fruits and red meats.

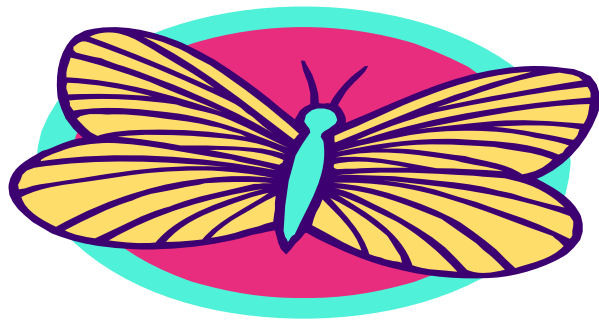
## How Is IBS Diagnosed?

If you think you have IBS, seeing your doctor is the first step. IBS can only be confirmed by a qualified medical practitioner. There is no single blood test, x-ray or scan which will diagnose the condition. Diagnosis is generally made on the basis of typical symptoms being present and upon your complete medical history. Blood tests may be taken to exclude other conditions and occasionally further investigations are performed.



## What Is The Treatment For IBS?

IBS is very much like having sensitive skin, only the problem is internal. No surgery or drug can eliminate the problem. It is simply a condition that must be controlled on a daily basis by avoiding those things that trigger the symptoms; however, many options are available to treat these. Your doctor will give you the best treatments available for your particular symptoms and encourage you to manage stress and make changes to your diet.



The following have been associated with a worsening of IBS symptoms:  
large meals, bloating from gas in the colon, medicines, wheat, rye, barley, chocolate, milk products and alcohol, drinks with caffeine, such as coffee, tea or colas, stress, conflict or emotional upsets.

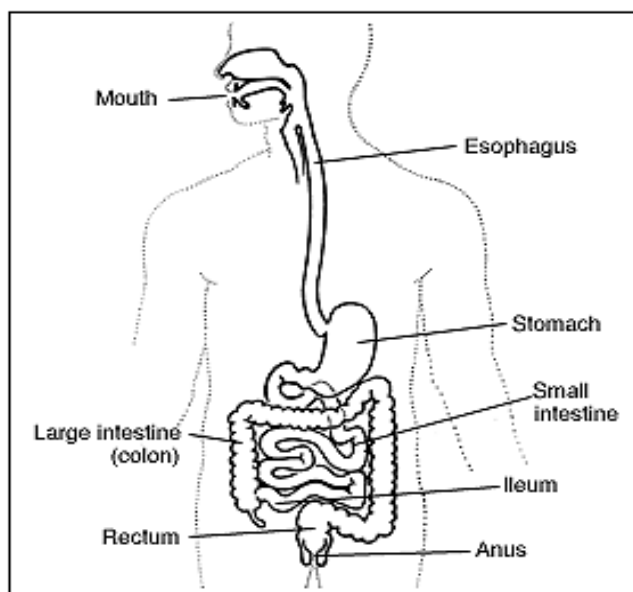
Researchers have found that women with IBS may have more symptoms during their menstrual period, suggesting that reproductive hormones can exacerbate IBS problems.

See your GP who will be able to find you a nutritionist or dietician if you suspect these could be triggers for you.



## What Are The Symptoms Of IBS?

Abdominal pain or discomfort in association with bowel dysfunction is the main symptom of IBS. Symptoms vary from person to person. Some people have constipation (hard, difficult to pass or infrequent bowel movements), others have diarrhoea (frequent loose stools often with an urgent need to move the bowels) and others experience alternating constipation and diarrhoea.



IBS affects the motility or movement of stool and gas through the colon and how fluids are absorbed. The lining of the colon (which is affected by the immune and nervous systems) regulates the passage of fluids in and out of the colon. In IBS, the lining appears to work properly,

however spasms can push the colon's contents too fast for the fluid to be absorbed, resulting in diarrhoea. In other patients, colonic movement is too slow, too much fluid is absorbed and constipation develops. The colon responds to strong stimuli (e.g. foods or stress) that would not bother other people.

Sometimes people with IBS have a crampy urge to move their bowels but cannot do so or pass mucus with their bowel movements. Some people experience bloating, which is gas building up in the intestines and causing the feeling of pressure inside the abdomen?

Bleeding, fever, weight loss and persistent severe pain are not symptoms of IBS and may indicate other problems. See your GP if you are suffering from any of these.

Other common symptoms include, headaches, increased frequency of passing urine, sleep disturbance, fatigue and tiredness, loss of appetite, and nausea. Features of depression occur in about a third of patients.