



Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a very common gastro-intestinal disorder resulting in abdominal pain and changes in bowel habit. The cause of IBS is unknown, but it seems to be related to an over-sensitive digestive tract. Changes to diet and lifestyle and some medicines can help IBS symptoms.

Signs and symptoms

IBS symptoms vary widely from person to person and include:

- Abdominal pain or cramping, often relieved by passing wind or a bowel motion
- Diarrhoea or constipation, or alternating constipation and diarrhoea
- 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
- Excess wind (flatulence)
- Mucus in bowel motions
- Heartburn or indigestion
- Nausea, loss of appetite.

Most people have mild symptoms that come and go, but sometimes IBS symptoms can be severe and persistent and interfere significantly 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.

Although IBS can be uncomfortable or distressing, it does not damage the bowel and does not lead to other bowel diseases.

Causes

IBS seems to be related to the sensitivity of the muscles that move food through the gastro-intestinal tract. Muscle contractions in the intestines may become:

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

The abdominal pain is thought to be due to strong, sudden muscle contractions ('spasms').

Triggers

Things that can trigger or aggravate IBS symptoms include:

Stress – Including strong emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger, fear) and stressful events. Worrying about the symptoms of IBS can make the symptoms worse.

Food and drinks – Eating can make symptoms worse, as it stimulates intestinal muscles. Some people also find specific foods and drinks make their symptoms worse (e.g., fatty foods, dairy products, excessive alcohol and caffeine, artificial sweeteners).

Gut infections – For example, gastroenteritis or bowel infections.

Medicines – Some medicines can worsen constipation (e.g., iron tablets, codeine, some antidepressants). Other 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 gastro-intestinal 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 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 particular symptoms and, in some cases, symptoms can be reduced but not completely eliminated.

- Try to identify 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; your emotional state at the time and any medicines you were taking.
- Reduce caffeine intake (tea, coffee and cola).
- Reduce alcohol intake.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Try gradually changing the amount of fibre in your diet (e.g., a high-fibre diet may help constipation).
- Drink more water to help prevent constipation. Healthy adults need at least two litres (eight glasses) of water daily.
- 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.

Important

Consult your doctor promptly if you have:

- Blood in your bowel motions
- A fever
- Loss of weight or appetite
- Constant or severe abdominal pain, or pain waking you at night
- Had bowel cancer or polyps
- A family history of bowel cancer, coeliac disease or inflammatory bowel disease
- Any new symptoms or a change in your existing condition
- IBS symptoms and are over 40 years or under 16 years of age.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

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

Medicines

Some medicines can help relieve IBS symptoms – ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

- Antispasm medicines (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) may relieve diarrhoea.
- Regular fibre supplements often help constipation and sometimes diarrhoea.
- Certain laxatives may help constipation, although they generally have a limited role in IBS.
- Complementary and probiotic medicines may help some symptoms.

Related fact cards

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

For more information

HealthInsite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

The Gastroenterological Society of Australia – phone (02)9256 5454 or website www.gesa.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

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

