



## Leaflet: Irritable Bowel Syndrome

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common condition that affects about one in five people in the UK. Symptoms can be quite variable. Some people just have occasional mild symptoms. Others may have unpleasant symptoms for long periods. Many people fall somewhere in between with flare ups of symptoms from time to time.

## What are the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome?

- ◆ *Pain* - may occur in different parts of the abdomen. It usually comes and goes for variable periods of time. The pain may be eased by passing stools (motions or faeces) or wind. The pain is typically described as a spasm or colic. The severity of pain can vary from mild to severe, both from person to person and from time to time in the same person.
- ◆ *Bloating* - or swelling of the abdomen may occur. More wind than usual may be passed.
- ◆ *Stools (motions)* - some people have bouts of diarrhoea and some have bouts of constipation. In the same person bouts of diarrhoea may alternate with bouts of constipation. Sometimes the stools become small and pellet like. Sometimes the stools become watery or ribbonary. At times, mucus may be mixed with the stools. Occasionally, mucus alone is passed when going to the toilet. Some people have to strain when going to the toilet. Others have urgency which means they have to get to the toilet quickly when the need is felt. Many people have a feeling of not fully emptying their bowels after going to the toilet. At different times in the same person there may be either a) constipation with straining and pellet stools or b) diarrhoea with urgency, mucus and soft stools.
- ◆ *Other symptoms* - sometimes occur. These include: nausea (feeling sick), headache, belching, poor appetite and bladder symptoms (an associated 'irritable bladder').

Many people with IBS have periods when they have no symptoms. However, such things as stressful life events, infections (such as food poisoning) or eating certain foods may trigger symptoms for a while. IBS does not shorten an expected life span, it does not lead to cancer of the bowel and does not cause blockages of the bowel or other serious conditions. It is typically variable with some good spells and some not so good spells.

Note: passing blood is *not* a symptom of IBS and should be mentioned to a doctor if it occurs.

## What causes irritable bowel syndrome?

The exact cause is not known. The intestine (small and large bowel) is a long muscular tube inside the abdomen. Food is passed along by regular contractions (squeezes) of the muscles in the wall of the intestine. Pain and other symptoms may develop if the contractions become abnormal or overactive. The area of overactivity in the intestine may determine whether constipation or diarrhoea develops. The cause of overactivity in parts of the intestine is not fully understood. One or more of the following may play a part: overactivity of the nerves or muscles of the intestine; sensitivity of the intestine to certain foods; stress or emotional upset. IBS is possibly several different conditions all resulting in similar symptoms but with different underlying causes. There are no tests that prove IBS. It is usually diagnosed by the typical symptoms and no further tests are then needed. Sometimes tests are done if symptoms are not typical. This is to rule out other conditions such as ulcers, colitis, etc. These tests are all normal in people with IBS.

## What are the treatments for irritable bowel syndrome?

- ◆ *Reassurance* - many people are reassured that their condition is IBS and not something more serious such as colitis. Understanding IBS often helps and may ease the severity of symptoms. Symptoms often settle for long periods without any specific treatment.
- ◆ *Fibre* - is the part of the food which is not absorbed into the body. It remains in the intestine and is a main part of the stools. Eating more fibre (or taking fibre supplements) may help. Fibre gives the intestines more to 'work on' and also helps to relieve constipation. However, there needs to be caution when fibre is increased, particularly with

and also helps to relieve constipation. However, there needs to be caution when fibre is increased, particularly with bran and wheat products. In some people with IBS, especially those with diarrhoea, it may make symptoms worse (particularly bloating). Increasing fibre is worth a try and if symptoms improve, a high fibre diet would be of benefit. However, if symptoms become worse then extra fibre may not be a good idea.

- ◆ *Antispasmodics* - are medicines that relax the muscles of the intestine. Different ones work in slightly different ways. Therefore, if one does not work well it is worth trying a different one. If one is found to suit then it is usually taken as required. This means that it is just taken when symptoms are bad. Many people take antispasmodic medication for a week or so at a time to control symptoms when they flare up.
- ◆ *Other medication* - anti-diarrhoea medication may be useful if diarrhoea is a main symptom. If constipation develops, increasing dietary fibre or fibre supplements usually helps. Sometimes a laxative may be advised for short periods if extra fibre is not sufficient to ease constipation.
- ◆ *Diet* - the composition of food is complex. Certain foods or parts of foods may not be absorbed well and may cause symptoms in some people. Some people with IBS can identify one or more foods that cause symptoms. These are typically dairy or wheat products. It may be worth trying a very bland diet if symptoms are difficult to control. For example, one meat, one fruit and one vegetable. Different foods can then be added gradually to see if any cause the symptoms. It may be possible to identify one or more foods that cause symptoms. This can be a tedious process and none may be found. However, some people claim success in controlling their symptoms by identifying food(s) that cause symptoms and then not eating them.
- ◆ *Stress* - situations such as family problems, exams, etc, may bring on symptoms in some people. People with anxious personalities may find symptoms difficult to control. The relationship between the mind, brain, nervous impulses and overactivity of internal organs such as the intestine is complex. Some people have found such things as relaxation techniques, stress counselling and similar therapies useful in controlling symptoms of IBS.

## Further help and advice

The IBS Network, Northern General Hospital, Sheffield, S5 7AU

Tel: 0114 261 1531 Web: [www.uel.ac.uk/pers/C.P.Dancey/ibs.html](http://www.uel.ac.uk/pers/C.P.Dancey/ibs.html)

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