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First in Digestive Health



What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common digestive health condition characterized by a range of symptoms which may include cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, constipation and/or diarrhea. While IBS causes discomfort, it does not permanently harm the digestive tract or cause more serious diseases, such as cancer.

When to See a Doctor

Occasional abdominal distress may result from a number of causes and often resolves on its own. If your symptoms have not resolved within a few days or if they persist or recur, it's time for a thorough evaluation and consultation with a specialist.

Diagnosis and Testing

The best diagnostic "test" for any condition is a thorough exam and consultation with a physician, including a review of personal and family history. In addition, a physician may recommend the following tests or procedures to confirm your diagnosis or and/or rule out other possible causes.

- ▶ Blood tests
- ▶ Breath tests (for lactose intolerance or bacterial overgrowth)
- ▶ Food intolerance/food allergy testing
- ▶ Imaging tests (e.g. ultrasound)
- ▶ Stool tests
- ▶ Colonoscopy or upper GI endoscopy (EGD)

SYMPTOMS MAY INCLUDE:

- ▶ Abdominal cramping
- ▶ Abdominal pain or discomfort
- ▶ Bloating
- ▶ Constipation
- ▶ Diarrhea
- ▶ Gas
- ▶ Irregular bowel habits
- ▶ Any combination of the above

RISK FACTORS INCLUDE:

The specific cause of IBS is unknown and an individual's risk for developing the condition may vary.

- ▶ **Gender:** more women are diagnosed with IBS than men
- ▶ **Age:** symptoms often first appear before the age of 35
- ▶ Family history of the condition
- ▶ Prior intestinal infection such as traveler's diarrhea or C. difficile infection

Treatment and Prevention

You may not be able to prevent IBS from occurring, but with the help of a physician many patients are able to mitigate or manage symptoms and improve quality of life through one or more of the following:

- ▶ Dietary changes
- ▶ Fiber supplements or certain probiotics
- ▶ Prescription medications
- ▶ Lifestyle changes such as increasing physical exercise, improving sleep patterns and/or managing stress

Diet and IBS

A variety of factors may contribute to IBS and although dietary changes can help alleviate symptoms, results are often unique to each patient. For some people, specific foods can trigger symptoms, while others find changes in meal size and frequency, or level of activity before or after a meal to be helpful. You may need to try different strategies before you find something that works for you. Some patients require a combination of therapies, including medication, so talk to your doctor if dietary changes alone are not effective.

Although the specific cause of IBS is unknown, many patients find dietary changes to be an important part of a successful treatment plan. While no one strategy works for everyone, there are many options to consider. For some patients, the primary IBS symptom may be constipation, while others may complain of frequent diarrhea or sporadic bouts of each, so begin with talking to your doctor about which strategies might work best for your individual condition. Some examples of dietary changes include increasing fiber intake, limiting specific foods or groups of foods, adjusting meal size and/or frequency or adjusting your level of activity before or after a meal. You may need to try different strategies before you find something that works for you.

According to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine, the recommended daily fiber intake for adults is 20-35 grams. Increasing your fiber intake can help prevent constipation and/or diarrhea, which are common symptoms of IBS. If you are not accustomed to fiber in your diet, increase your intake gradually. Patients who experience episodes of abdominal pain, gas and/or bloating should monitor their diet to identify if certain foods or food groups trigger these symptoms. Dairy, caffeine, fatty foods and gassy vegetables (e.g. broccoli, beans) are some of the more common triggers. Try decreasing or eliminating these foods one at a time and monitoring your progress. Keeping a daily record of your food and beverage intake and associated symptoms using a journal or mobile app can be particularly helpful. If you do see an improvement, work with your doctor to refine your dietary strategy and ensure you do not become nutritionally deficient in any one area. Some patients require a combination of therapies, including medication, so talk to your doctor if dietary changes alone are not effective.

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