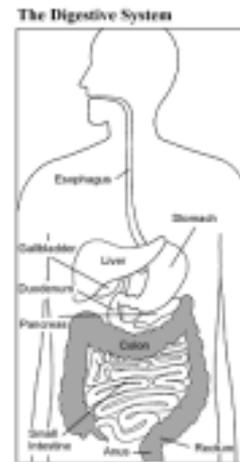


IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME

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What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder that may affect up to 30 percent of all Australians at some time during their lives. The disorder has many names, including nervous colon, spastic colon, spastic bowel, mucous colitis and spastic colitis. However, it should not be confused with diseases like ulcerative or Crohn's colitis (inflammatory bowel disease).

IBS is a syndrome, a pattern of symptoms such as pain and bloating that tend to occur together. It is not a "disease" in the normal sense of the word (i.e., it cannot be caught or transmitted from person to person as a cold can nor can it be cured by an operation or medication). It is not life-threatening.

Often IBS is just an annoyance but for some people it is disabling.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

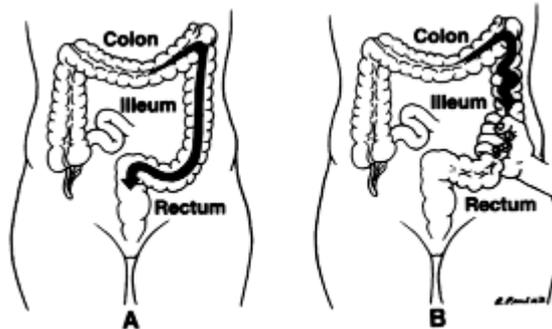
People with IBS may experience constipation, diarrhoea, or a combination - constipation at some times and diarrhoea at other times. In addition, IBS may produce cramps, urgency, or a gassy, bloated feeling in the abdomen. Mucus, sometimes seen in bowel movements, is also a symptom of IBS. Rectal bleeding is **never** caused by IBS, and any rectal bleeding must be properly and thoroughly evaluated.

What causes IBS?

The underlying cause of this disorder is an abnormality in the way the intestinal muscles contract. These muscles, which form the outer layer of the intestine, work automatically to move food products along the intestine to the rectum and out the anus. IBS is a disorder of the **function** of the intestinal muscles. Even when the muscles **appear normal** under a microscope, they may not **function** normally, contracting too forcefully or weakly, too slowly or rapidly, at certain times.

Additionally there appears to be visceral hypersensitivity. This means that the bowel responds excessively to stimuli. This involves both nerve and hormonal pathways. Ordinary events such as eating and distension from gas may cause the colon to overreact in a person with IBS.

The disordered peristalsis (contractions) can lead to slow transit of faeces through the bowel and this will give the bacteria longer to ferment the contents and produce more gas-hence more bloating and pain.



Although there is no physical obstruction, a patient may perceive cramps or functional blockage.

What role does stress play in IBS?

Emotional stress will contribute to IBS. The brain and the intestine are closely connected by nerve fibres that control the automatic functioning of the intestinal muscles, and many people may experience nausea or diarrhoea when nervous or anxious. While we may not be able to control the effect stress has on our intestines, reducing the **sources** of stress in our lives - high pressure jobs, family tensions, etc. - may alleviate the symptoms of IBS.

How is IBS diagnosed?

A careful medical history and physical examination by a colo-rectal surgeon is essential to proper diagnosis. Most patients will require a colonoscopy to rule out other diseases or conditions such as - cancer, diverticulitis, inflammation of the intestines or depression.

How is IBS treated?

Simply understanding that IBS is not a serious or life-threatening condition may relieve anxiety and stress, which often contribute to the problem. Mental health counselling and stress reduction (relaxation training) can help relieve the symptoms of IBS in some individuals. Acupuncture and hypnotherapy have been tried.

In others, increasing the amount of non-digestible, bulk-forming foods ("roughage") in the diet may be all that is needed to relieve symptoms. Adding roughage, such as psyllium husk, to your diet may eliminate or lessen the severity of cramps, result in softer stools that pass along the intestine more easily, and absorb excess water in the intestine to prevent diarrhoea. When the major complaint is constipation, additional water should be provided in the diet along with bulk agents to soften the stool (eg:Metamucil).

In some cases, dietary roughage alone may not provide adequate relief from cramping and bloating. There are several medications that act directly on the intestinal muscles to reduce spasm (eg: Colofac, Mebeverine). Research is continuing into new medications.

Are there any foods to be avoided?

Sometimes, caffeine, milk products or alcohol can make symptoms of IBS worse. Caffeine is a stimulant and may overstimulate the bowel contractions of a patient with IBS. Fatty meals stimulate bowel contractions and hence a low fat diet is recommended.

Dairy products, such as cheese and milk, may cause diarrhoea in some people and constipation in others. Because dairy products are an important source of calcium and other nutrients that your body needs, be sure to get adequate nutrients in the foods that you substitute.

Although additional fibre is usually important it can make symptoms of bloating and distension worse in some people.

In addition, smokers should beware: IBS symptoms may be aggravated by nicotine.



How long does the treatment take to relieve symptoms?

Relief of IBS Symptoms is often a slow process. It may take six months or more for definite improvement to be appreciated. Patience is extremely important in dealing with this problem.

The tendency for the intestine to respond to stress will always be present. With attention to proper diet, an increase in dietary roughage, and in some cases, use of appropriate medications, the symptoms of IBS can be greatly improved or eliminated. Mild symptoms may recur from time to time.

Can IBS lead to more serious problems?

IBS does not cause cancer, bleeding or inflammatory bowel disease. Over the long term, IBS can be associated with but does not cause diverticulosis - "pockets" in the intestinal wall. This can occasionally result in diverticulitis, an inflammatory condition of one or more of the diverticula or "pockets". Treatment of IBS with bulk agents helps to prevent diverticulosis and other colon problems.