

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome

**Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a very common gastrointestinal (gut) disorder that causes abdominal pain and changes in bowel habits. The cause of IBS is unknown, but it seems to be related to an oversensitive digestive tract. Changes to diet and lifestyle and some medicines can help relieve IBS symptoms.**

Although IBS can be uncomfortable or upsetting, it does not damage the bowel and does not lead to other bowel diseases. It can affect anyone at any age, but often starts in late teenage years or early adulthood.

## Signs and symptoms

IBS symptoms vary widely from person to person and include:

- pain or cramping in the abdomen(stomach), often relieved by passing wind or a bowel motion
- diarrhoea or constipation
- feeling as though the bowel has not emptied properly after passing a bowel motion
- feeling full or bloated

- passing a lot of wind
- mucus in bowel motions.

IBS can also cause alternating constipation and diarrhoea.

Most people have mild symptoms that come and go. Sometimes IBS symptoms can be severe and constant and interfere 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.

## Causes

The exact cause of IBS is not known. It may involve a change in the function of nerves and muscles in the gastrointestinal tract (gut).

The symptoms of IBS seem to be related to the sensitivity of the muscles that move food through the gut. IBS may be inherited.

## Triggers

Things that can trigger or worsen IBS symptoms include:

- stress – such as stressful emotions (e.g. anger, fear) and events. Worrying about the symptoms of IBS can make the symptoms worse. Some people with IBS have anxiety or depression and treatment of these conditions can ease the symptoms of IBS
- food and drinks – eating can make symptoms worse, as it stimulates gut muscles. Some people also find certain foods and drinks make their symptoms worse (e.g. fatty foods, spicy foods, foods that cause gas/bloating, dairy products, alcohol, caffeine, some fruits and some sweeteners such as fructose and sorbitol)
- gut infections – e.g. gastroenteritis (gastro) or bowel infections
- medicines – some medicines can worsen constipation (e.g. iron tablets, codeine, some antidepressants). Some 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 gut problems. A doctor can arrange tests to look into

the cause of the symptoms. These tests may include a full medical check, blood tests, testing faeces (bowel motions) 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 ease the symptoms. In some cases symptoms can be reduced but not completely stopped.

- Try to identify and avoid IBS triggers. Keep a record of your symptoms for several weeks. Write down when they occur; what you were doing, eating and drinking before they started; how you were feeling at the time and any medicines you were taking.
- Reduce your caffeine intake (e.g. tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks).
- Reduce your intake of alcohol and fizzy drinks.
- Eat regular, healthy meals including fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Take time to eat slowly and don't miss meals.
- Try slowly changing the amount of fibre in your diet (e.g. a diet higher in fibre may help relieve constipation).
- Drink more water to help prevent constipation. Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to).

- 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 practise relaxation techniques to manage stress.

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

## Treatments

Treatments that may help relieve symptoms of IBS include counselling and psychology (e.g. cognitive behaviour therapy), diet and lifestyle changes, and some medicines.

Medicines may help relieve IBS symptoms:

- Medicines that relax gut muscles (e.g. peppermint oil, mebeverine, hyoscine) may relieve abdominal pain and sometimes diarrhoea.
- Some antidepressant medicines may relieve abdominal pain.
- Some anti-diarrhoea medicines (e.g. loperamide, cholestyramine) may relieve diarrhoea.
- Regular fibre supplements can relieve constipation and sometimes diarrhoea.
- Some laxatives may help relieve constipation, although usually they are not helpful in IBS.
- Complementary and probiotic ('good bacteria') medicines may help relieve some symptoms.

## Important

Seek medical advice straight away if you have:

- a constant change in your bowel pattern (e.g. either diarrhoea or constipation)
- blood in your bowel motions or from your rectum
- unexplained loss of weight or appetite
- diarrhoea at night
- constant or severe abdominal pain or pain waking you at night.

or if you have IBS symptoms and:

- are over 40 years or under 16 years of age
- a fever
- vomiting
- repeated mouth ulcers
- have had bowel cancer or polyps
- a family history of bowel cancer, coeliac disease or inflammatory bowel disease.

Some medicines for IBS are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## For more information

### **Irritable Bowel Information and Support Association of Australia (IBIS)**

Phone: (07) 3376 2496

Website: [www.ibis-australia.org](http://www.ibis-australia.org)

### **Dietitians Association of Australia**

Website: [daa.asn.au](http://daa.asn.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **NPS Medicine Wise**

#### **Medicines Information Line**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.***

***Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.***

## Related fact cards

- » *Anxiety*
- » *Depression*
- » *Constipation*
- » *Fibre and Bowel Health*
- » *Relaxation Techniques*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: