

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME (IBS)

Information Sheet

WHAT IS IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?

Irritable bowel syndrome or 'IBS' is a common problem that affects the bowel. IBS refers to a disorder that involves abdominal pain and bloating, as well as changes in bowel movements.

Around one in five Australians experiences symptoms of IBS at some time in their life. People with IBS appear to have a sensitive bowel, which is more prone to getting 'upset' when eating certain foods.

More women than men are diagnosed with IBS, and the symptoms often begin in early adulthood.

WHAT CAUSES IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?

The cause of IBS is unknown however environmental factors do play a role. These include infection, changes of routine, emotional stress, medications, and dietary factors.

The mechanism for the development of IBS may involve changes to nerve function in the bowel and/or changes in the normal microbial population of the bowel.

Irritable bowel syndrome does not cause lasting damage to the gut and does not contribute to the development of serious conditions such as colitis or cancer.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF IBS?

- Abdominal pain and cramps. These often occur after eating and are relieved by passing wind or a bowel movement.
- Diarrhoea or constipation (some people alternate between diarrhoea and constipation).

- Abdominal bloating
- Mucous in the stool
- A sensation that the bowels are not fully emptied after passing a motion.

None of these symptoms are exclusive to IBS. It is unusual for IBS to produce these symptoms for the first time after the age of 40.

WHAT SYMPTOMS ARE NOT DUE TO IBS?

- Bleeding from the back passage
- Symptoms of anaemia
- Weight loss
- Fever
- Diarrhoea at night

If you have these problems further tests will be necessary.

IS THERE A TEST FOR IBS?

No, there is no specific test. To begin with, making a diagnosis of IBS requires that your doctor take a thorough medical and surgical history, including a family history, as well as perform a physical examination.

If your symptoms are typical, you may not need any tests at all and the diagnosis can be made on clinical grounds. However, further tests are required if your symptoms develop after the age of 40 years, if you have a family history of bowel or gastrointestinal cancer, or if it is suspected that your symptoms may be caused by another illness.

Important illnesses to exclude are inflammatory bowel disease, infection, coeliac disease, diverticulitis and cancer.

Diagnostic tests may include blood tests, stool tests, abdominal imaging, and/or endoscopy or colonoscopy depending on your symptoms.

WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY SYMPTOMS?

Start a diary

- Keep track of what you eat each day, what you do, and how you feel. That way, you can work out whether anything you do or eat makes your symptoms better or worse.

Diet modification

- Eat a healthy diet consisting of whole foods and minimise processed food and drinks that are high in sugar or artificial sweeteners.
- Stop eating foods that might be making your IBS worse. This is best done in consultation with a dietician and your doctor so that you are able to maintain a healthy and satisfying diet while reducing your symptoms.
- If you have constipation, eat more fibre and drink at least 2 litres of water per day. You can do this by eating more wholegrains and vegetables. Or you can take fibre powder such as Benefibre® or psyllium husks. (If eating more fibre makes symptoms of bloating worse, you may need to change the fibre source in your diet).

Exercise

- Try to do something active for 20 to 60 minutes daily. The bowel moves when you move. If you spend a lot of the day sitting, get up to move around periodically throughout the day. Studies show this helps improve IBS symptoms.

Avoid analgesic use

- Opioid analgesics (codeine, oxycodone) may exacerbate abdominal pain and bloating and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g. Ibuprofen) may injure the bowel and exacerbate symptoms.

WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY SYMPTOMS? *cont.*

Reduce stress

- Some stress is unavoidable; however reducing stress in your life may improve your symptoms. Mindfulness techniques or meditation may be helpful in this.

Pass flatus

- Passing wind is a necessary function of the bowel, however this can be difficult or embarrassing for people in a work or social setting. Holding onto wind can lead to gaseous distension of the bowel and discomfort. Find somewhere where you can pass wind during the day.

HOW IS IBS TREATED?

Various therapies and lifestyle changes can ease the symptoms of IBS. Although there is no cure for IBS, most people are able to gain control of their symptoms over time.

It is important to note that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' therapy for IBS and the treatment strategy should be tailored to each person.

Therapies that can help with IBS symptoms include:

Dietary changes

- The low FODMAP diet is one of the most effective therapies for the treatment of IBS (see low FODMAP information sheet). It is the most researched diet for the treatment of IBS and involves reducing the intake of short chain sugars in the diet with the aim of reducing gas production and distension of the bowel.
- For patients with constipation predominant IBS, increasing water intake and non-fermented fibre in the diet can improve symptoms.

Psychological therapy

- Both cognitive behaviour therapy and hypnotherapy have been demonstrated to be effective therapies for some patients with IBS.

Medicines

- To ease diarrhoea
- To ease constipation

Antidepressants

- These medicines work by blocking pain. When used to treat IBS, they are given at a much lower dose than would normally be given to treat depression.

WHAT WILL MY LIFE BE LIKE?

IBS symptoms following a gastrointestinal infection will usually resolve with time. However, many people with IBS have the condition for the rest of their life. Despite this most people can find ways to manage and significantly improve their symptoms in consultation with health professionals.

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?

For further information please discuss with your doctor.

More information can also be found through the **Gastroenterological Society of Australasia (GESA)** leaflets:

<http://www.gesa.org.au/resources/patients/inflammatory-bowel-disease/>

<http://www.gesa.org.au/resources/patients/low-fodmap-diet/>

This information is intended for patients of Lumen Gastroenterology as a guide only. Please ask your doctor if you have any questions relating to this information.