

The cause of IBS is not known and as yet there is no cure. Doctors call it a functional disorder because there is no sign of disease when the colon is examined. IBS causes a great deal of discomfort and distress, but it does not cause permanent harm to the intestines and does not lead to intestinal bleeding of the bowel or to a serious disease such as cancer. Often IBS is just a mild annoyance, but for some people it can be disabling. They may be afraid to go to social events, to go out to a job, or to travel even short distances. Most people with IBS, however, are able to control their symptoms through stress management, diet, and sometimes with medications prescribed by their physicians.

### **What Causes IBS?**

The colon, which is about 6 feet long, connects the small intestine with the rectum and anus. The major function of the colon is to absorb water and salts from digestive products that enter from the small intestine. The stool then passes through the colon by a pattern of movements to the left side of the colon, where it is stored until a bowel movement occurs.

Colon motility (contraction of intestinal muscles and movement of its contents) is controlled by nerves and hormones and by electrical activity in the colon muscle. The electrical activity serves as a “pacemaker” similar to the mechanism that controls heart function.

Movements of the colon propel the content slowly back and forth but mainly toward the rectum. A few times each day strong muscle contractions move down the colon pushing fecal material ahead of them. Some of these strong contractions result in a bowel movement.

Because doctors have been unable to find an organic cause, emotional conflict or stress is often a cause of IBS. While stress may worsen IBS symptoms, research suggests that other factors also are important. Researchers have found that the colon muscle of a person with IBS begins to spasm after only mild stimulation.

The person with IBS seems to have a colon that is more sensitive and reactive than usual, so it responds strongly to stimuli that would not bother most people.

Certain medicines and foods may trigger spasms in some people. Sometimes the spasm delays the passage of stool, leading to constipation. Chocolate milk products or large amounts of alcohol are frequent offenders. Caffeine causes loose stools in many people, but it is more likely to affect those with IBS. Researchers also have found that women with IBS may have more symptoms during their menstrual periods, suggesting that reproductive hormones can increase IBS symptoms.

### **What Are the Symptoms of IBS?**

It is important to realize that normal bowel function varies from person to person. Normal bowel movements range from as many as three stools a day to as few as three a week. A normal movement is one that is formed but not hard, contains no blood, and is passed without cramps or pain.

People with IBS usually have cramping abdominal pain with painful constipation or diarrhea. In some people, constipation and diarrhea alternate. Sometimes people with IBS pass mucus with their bowel movements. Bleeding, fever, weight loss, and persistent severe pain are not symptoms of IBS, and may indicate other problems.

### **How is IBS Diagnosed?**

IBS usually is diagnosed after doctors exclude more serious organic diseases. The doctor will take a complete medical history that includes a careful description of symptoms. A physical examination and laboratory test will be done. A stool sample will be tested for evidence of bleeding. The doctor also may do diagnostic procedures such as x-rays or lower GI endoscopy (viewing the colon through a flexible tube) to find out if there is organic disease.

### **How Does Diet and Stress Affect IBS?**

Many people report that their symptoms occur following a meal or when they are under stress.

Eating causes contractions of the colon. Normally, this response may cause and urge to have a bowel movement within 30 to 60 minutes after a meal. In people with IBS, the urge may come sooner and may be associated with pain, cramps and diarrhea. Fat in any form (animal or vegetable) is a strong stimulus of colonic contractions. It is crucial to restrict diet drinks and chewing gum consumption and exclude your lactose (milk sugar) intolerance.

Stress also stimulates colonic spasms in people with IBS. This process is not completely understood, but scientists point out that the colon is controlled partly by the nervous system. Mental health counseling and stress reduction (relaxation training) can help relieve the symptoms of IBS. However, doctors are quick to note that this does not mean IBS is the result of a personality disorder. IBS is at least partly a disorder of colon motility and sensation.

### **How Does a Good Diet Help IBS?**

For many people, eating a proper diet lessens IBS symptoms. Before changing your diet, it is a good idea to keep a journal noting which foods seem to cause distress. You also may want to consult a registered dietitian, who can help you make changes in your diet. For instance, if dairy products cause your symptoms to flare up, you can try eating less of those foods. Real yogurt might be better tolerated because it contains organisms that supply lactase, the enzyme needed to digest lactose, the sugar found in milk products.

Dietary fiber may lessen IBS symptoms in many cases. Whole-grain breads and cereals, beans, fruits, and vegetables are good sources of fiber. High-fiber diets keep the colon mildly distended, which may help to prevent spasms from developing. Some forms of fiber also keep water in the stools, thereby preventing hard stools that are difficult to pass. High-fiber diets may cause gas and bloating, but within a few weeks, these

symptoms often go away as your body adjusts to the diet. However, please avoid taking more than 30 grams of fiber a day.

## NOTES

### **Can Medicines Relieve IBS Symptoms?**

There is no standard way of treating IBS and various medications may relieve your discomfort depending on the type of IBS.

### **How is IBS Linked to More Serious Problems?**

IBS has not been shown to lead to any serious organic diseases. No link has been established between IBS and inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. IBS does not lead to cancer. Some patients have a more severe form of IBS, and the fear of pain and diarrhea may cause them to withdraw from normal activities. In such cases, doctors may recommend mental health counseling.

## **Irritable Bowel Syndrome**

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