

Irritable Bowel - Facts



What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome? (IBS)

IBS is a functional disorder of the colon (large intestine) but with no sign of a structural defect, such as ulceration, prolapse etc.

What are the symptoms?

You could have any combination of bloating, flatulence, abdominal pain, lots of mucus in the colon, altered bowel function with constipation alternating with diarrhoea, nausea, loss of appetite, and possibly anxiety or depression.

IBS is often diagnosed when everything else has been ruled out, but there are other conditions which may mimic IBS. These include excessive caffeine, sugar and carbonated drink consumption, enteric infections such as giardiasis, lactose intolerance, cancer, malabsorption diseases, metabolic disorders such as diabetes or hyperthyroidism, laxative abuse, candida and other inflammatory bowel diseases.

Who gets it?

Twice as many women as men, but quite a reasonable proportion of the population.



What causes IBS?

Good question. There are many possibilities, physical, mental and emotional. Stress can cause a lot of gut dysfunction and some studies have found that when children are exposed to stress, gut symptoms can result. Bad diet; long-term use of antibiotics, infection, post-surgical infection or bowel resection causing malabsorption, food sensitivities such as to wheat or dairy, and many other things can also contribute. An emotional tendency to hoard can be another factor, in terms of "hanging on" to rubbish or other things which should be discarded. Constant negative thinking, and similar mental/emotional states can be factors too.

What has sugar got to do with it?

Constant intake of refined sugar decreases the movement of foods through the system by raising the blood sugar and promoting bacterial overgrowth. Some forms of bacteria are fine in the right place, but when pushed into different areas can cause a lot of problems. Most sugar (as glucose) is absorbed in the duodenum and jejunum (small intestine), but when you eat too much, they get overloaded and can't do their job, so undigested sugars end up in the bowel where they cause inflammation and malfunction.



What is it about bad diets that can cause IBS?

Apart from the sugar issue mentioned above, most junk food is high in saturated fat, salt, carbs and low in fibre and antioxidants. Low dietary fibre also slows down the gut, so you hold onto stuff more, and reabsorb toxins before they're eliminated. All this causes more stress on your body, and the high fat and salt levels contribute to cardiovascular disease by promoting high blood pressure and atherosclerosis.

What sort of foods might be involved in sensitivity reactions?

One study showed the most commonly implicated foods are dairy (40.7%), onions (35.2%), wheat (29.7%), chocolate (27.5%), coffee (24.2%), eggs (23.3%), nuts (18%), citrus fruit (17.8%), tea (17.65%), rye (17/6%), potatoes (15.4%), barley (13.3%), oats (12.1%) and corn (11.1%). You could also be sensitive to more than one food, or perhaps sensitivity occurs when two particular foods are consumed together.



What is visceral hypersensitivity?

This is when you get pain from something that should be painless. In this case, abdominal pain. It is common with IBS, but nobody ever seems to find the cause. There's a theory that mast cells (a type of cell found in the intestines and skin which plays a role in inflammation and allergy) and substance P (a protein that stimulates nerve endings and inflammation) are involved. Both cells have been found in far higher numbers in IBS sufferers than in the general population. You need foods high in antioxidants to help.

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But if I've got diarrhoea, I don't want to be eating loads of fibre, do I?

Not straight away. Getting rid of the diarrhoea is about bringing your body back into balance. You need plenty of water, as diarrhoea can make you dehydrated. This means **water**, not tea, coffee, alcohol, juices or energy drinks. As diarrhoea often occurs at times of major emotional stress, you need to work on these issues or stress management and calm down. Once it is under control, then a diet with plenty of steamed veg, salads and moderate amounts of raw fruit, balanced by wholegrains, healthy fats and complete protein will help you keep the IBS in balance. You will also need probiotics.

How do probiotics help?

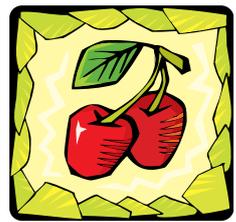
In several ways. General probiotics (*Lactobacillus acidophilus* etc.) help the health of your colon by crowding out bad bacteria, creating a friendlier environment in there, enhancing your immune system, and helping to digest your food more completely. They also have many other functions, and there are many different strains of probiotics.

Lactobacillus plantarum 299V (such as in Inner Health Plus) is specific to IBS relief, calming down inflammation, breaking down arginine and generating nitrogen oxide to help get your gut moving properly again, and creating an acidic environment in the colon which many pathogenic bacteria can't live in.



So, can you give me a handy summary of what to do?

1. Under the supervision of a nutritionist/naturopath, undertake an elimination diet for 10-14 days to get rid of any suspects. This diet includes relatively non-allergenic foods
2. Increase the intake of fibre, particularly if constipated. If there is sensitivity to cereals, ensure that those cereals aren't used as the source of the fibre!
3. If you have diarrhoea, there are herbs rich in tannins which help to dry up the excess. Herb teas, including raspberry leaf tea can be good.
4. Take digestive enzymes to prevent bloating and flatulence, and digest your food more efficiently.
5. Drink plenty of water to hydrate yourself.
6. Get tested for anaemia and heavy metals (as they can cause many health problems)
7. Eat the protein part of your diet first
8. A magnesium supplement may be good. If you have diarrhoea, you could be low in minerals. Magnesium helps the bowel to relax, and lowers blood pressure.
9. Start probiotics, and talk to your naturopath about the best sort to take
10. Take ginger and turmeric in the diet - they're both great antioxidants and ginger helps calm the bowel
11. Eat small, frequent meals rather than whoppers and don't snack
12. Get stress out of your life. If you can't, learn to manage it, take Bach or Bush Flower essences, do yoga and tai chi, or anything that's beneficial. (NOT alcohol.)
13. Peppermint oil capsules have been found to be anti-spasmodic, and analgesic to many IBS sufferers. They must be enterically coated - do not drink peppermint oil.
14. When your elimination diet is finished, challenge with some of the foods which have been removed. Do this one by one, and keep a food diary for as long as is necessary.
15. Lower or stop your consumption of caffeine-containing products: tea, coffee, energy drinks, chocolate etc. and get used to a lot less sugar in your diet.
16. Avoid artificial sweeteners. They're not natural and your liver has trouble breaking them down. Many people have reactions (bloating, headaches, pain, cramps and much more) to these substances.



Are there any good websites or books for me to read?

Try John McGuire's article on IBS at

<http://www.naturopathsydney.net/john-mcguire-on-irritable-bowel-syndrome-the-rome-criteria-gas-and-diet>

Health Guidance - Irritable Bowel Syndrome

<http://www.healthguidance.org/entry/4918/1/Irritable-Bowel-Syndrome-IBS.html>

There are lots of books available. Take your pick at any major bookshop.

