

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

General Information

Irritable bowel syndrome is a chronic (long-lasting) disorder of your colon. The cause and cure are unknown. Although no sign of this disease shows up on X-rays or other tests, irritable bowel syndrome (known as IBS) causes many symptoms, including:

- lower abdominal pain
- gas
- bloating
- constipation (difficult or infrequent bowel movements) or diarrhea (loose, watery stools).

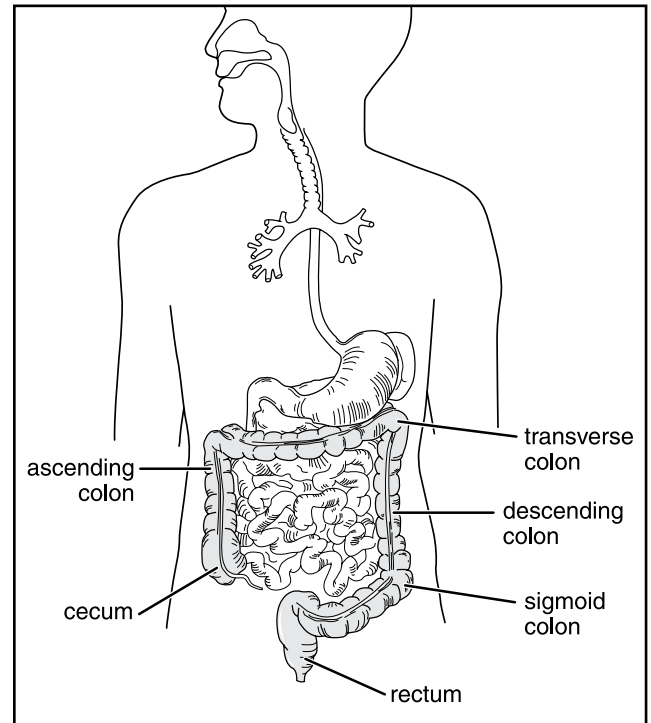
IBS can cause discomfort, but it is not serious and does not lead to a serious disease. It does not cause inflammation and should not be confused with ulcerative colitis (an inflammation of the colon).

You can manage your IBS symptoms through a eating a proper diet, managing stress and, possibly, by taking medicine.

Symptoms of IBS

A normal bowel function ranges from 3 stools a day to 3 stools a week. A normal bowel movement is one that is formed but not hard, has no blood and is passed without cramps or pain.

If you have IBS, you can have a combination of constipation and diarrhea. You can also have gas, pain and bloating. Most people who have IBS have lower abdominal pain and constipation, sometimes followed by diarrhea.



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The digestive system.

Other people have pain and mild constipation and no diarrhea.

The rarest form of IBS is severe, painless diarrhea. People with severe IBS have watery bowel movements after breakfast nearly every day. They may also have diarrhea after other meals, stressful events or for no apparent reason.

Causes of IBS

Because the exact cause is unknown, IBS has long been thought to be caused by stress. Recent studies show there may be another cause. Most symptoms of IBS are related to an abnormal movement pattern of the colon.

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The colon absorbs water and salt from food and liquid that enters the small intestine. Two liters of liquid material enter the 6-foot long colon from the small intestine every day. This material may stay there for many days until most of the fluid and salt are absorbed back into the body. The stool then passes through the colon to the rectum where it is stored until a bowel movement occurs.

Movements of the colon are controlled by electrical activity in the colon muscle and by nerves and hormones. These movements propel the contents toward the rectum.

If you have IBS, the muscle in the lower portion of the colon contracts abnormally (spasms). This spasm may be related to crampy pain and may delay a bowel movement, causing constipation. Or, the spasm may lead to diarrhea.

How Your Health Care Provider Will Confirm IBS

Before your health care provider can confirm IBS, other diseases or disorders must first be ruled out. Your health care provider will ask for your medical history, give you a physical exam and may do certain tests such as X-rays or an endoscopy.

How Stress can Affect IBS

Stress causes spasms in the colon. The reason is unknown, but the colon is partially controlled by the nervous system. IBS is not caused by a personality disorder, but you may want to consider counselling if stress is interfering with your everyday life.

How Diet can Affect IBS

Eating causes your colon to contract. Usually, this response may cause an urge to have a bowel movement within 30 to 60 minutes after a meal. With IBS, this reflex can lead to cramps and diarrhea. This depends on how many calories and fat grams are in your meal. Fat (whether from animal or vegetable) is the strongest cause of colon contractions after a meal.

Fatty foods you may want to limit or avoid include bacon, sausage, poultry skin, dairy products, vegetable oils, margarines, shortenings and nondairy whipped toppings.

Eating a proper diet helps lessen your IBS symptoms. Before making a change in your diet, try to identify which foods make your symptoms worse.

Some diet guidelines include:

- **Eat more fiber.** Fiber is found in whole grain breads and cereals, and in fruits and vegetables. Fiber will help prevent spasms and will also help keep water in your stools. Talk with your health care provider before you take an over-the-counter fiber supplement. A high-fiber diet may cause gas and bloating until your digestive tract gets used to the increase in fiber.
- **Avoid eating large meals.** These can cause cramping and diarrhea. Eat smaller meals more often (or smaller portions at meals) to help lessen your symptoms. Eat foods that are low in fat and high in carbohydrates and protein. Good food choices include pastas, rice, breads, cereals, fruits, vegetables, chicken and turkey (without skin), lean meats, most fish, and low-fat dairy products.

Information adapted from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.