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Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

What is IBS?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) or “spastic colon” is a very common gastrointestinal condition that is diagnosed when a person has any of a variety of abdominal symptoms and/or a change in bowel habits in the absence of detectable organic pathology. More common in women, it usually occurs between the ages of 20 and 50. Irritable Bowel Syndrome is considered to be a "functional", not an anatomical, disorder of the gastrointestinal tract related to bowel spasms. It is not a precursor to colon cancer or other colon diseases.

The Normal Bowel and the Irritable Bowel

When the bowel is functioning normally, it produces orderly, gentle muscular contractions, alternating with relaxation, that propel bowel contents toward the rectum and anus for elimination. In Irritable Bowel Syndrome, the muscular contractions are disorganized, harsh, or spasmodic, resulting in abdominal discomfort and erratic propulsion. Sometimes, this causes frequent, occasionally "explosive" elimination of liquid stools; and at other times, the bowel spasm delays normal evacuation, causing constipation. Therefore, although it seems contradictory, both diarrhea and constipation can be produced by the same basic mechanism in Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

What are the Symptoms?

Change in the frequency of bowel movements from what is normal for the person ("normal" bowel movements are highly individual and range from 3 times a day to 3 times a week.). Common symptoms include diarrhea, constipation, or alternating diarrhea and constipation. Abdominal pain, increased abdominal bloating and gas are frequent symptoms. With IBS, the nerves and muscles in the bowel are extra-sensitive. For example, the muscles may contract too much when you eat. These contractions can cause cramping and diarrhea during or shortly after a meal. Or the nerves can be overly sensitive to the stretching of the bowel (because of gas, for example). Cramping or pain can result. Emotional stress, certain foods, exercise and hormones can trigger symptoms. Foods that tend to cause symptoms include milk products, chocolate, alcohol, caffeine, carbonated drinks, and fatty foods. In some cases, simply eating a large meal will trigger symptoms.

How do I get tested for IBS?

There is no test for IBS. It is a clinical diagnosis based on symptoms. Your diet, especially regarding fiber, fat, lactose, gas-forming foods, caffeine, and alcohol intake, is important to consider. Symptoms similar to irritable bowel syndrome may be caused by

lactose intolerance. This is the body's inability to digest lactose, a disaccharide found in milk products, which is frequently acquired as people get older. To test for this, you may be advised to eliminate milk products from your diet for 2 weeks to determine if your symptoms improve without lactose.

What is the treatment for IBS?

Treatment may include counseling, dietary changes, and medications. There is no cure for IBS, but many things can be suggested to lessen the severity and frequency of symptoms. You may have to try a combination of things to see which works best for you. IBS may be due to a variety of factors such as stress, diet, or hormones. Studies have shown that people with IBS may have changes in the way their intestinal muscles move food and liquid through the digestive tract.

To help control IBS, increase the fiber content in your diet to make your stools soft, bulky and easier to pass. It is recommended to eat 20-35 grams of fiber daily. Fiber is found in bran, bread, cereals, beans (lima, kidney), legumes, fruits (apples, peaches) and vegetables (carrots, peas). You may also supplement with Benefiber, Citracel, Metamucil or Psyllium. You should also decrease the fat intake in your diet. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, sorbitol (a sweetener found in chewing gum), and chocolate. Avoid gas-forming foods from the cruciferous vegetable family (cabbage, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cauliflower, radishes, and turnips). Avoid large meals - smaller, more frequent meals may reduce symptoms. Reducing stress and increasing exercise may help IBS symptoms. Studies show that behavioral therapy, relaxation therapy and hypnotherapy can help relieve pain and symptoms. Some prescription medications may also help control symptoms.

Further information can be obtained from:

International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD)

P.O. Box 170864

Milwaukee, WI 53217-8076

Phone: (414) 964-1799 or 1-888-964-2001

www.iffgd.org

National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC)

2 Information Way

Bethesda, MD 20892-3570

Phone: 1-800-891-5389 or (301) 654-3810

www.niddk.nih.gov

The Sensitive Gut, a Harvard Health Publication

877-649-9457 or www.health.harvard.edu

American Gastroenterological Association www.gastro.org

Cookbooks include:

Heather Van Vorous: [The First Year with Irritable Bowel Syndrome](#) and [Eating for IBS](#)