



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a very common gastrointestinal disorder resulting in abdominal pain and changes in bowel habit. The cause of IBS is unknown, but it seems to be related to an oversensitive digestive tract. Changes to diet and lifestyle and some medicines can help relieve IBS symptoms.

Signs and symptoms

IBS symptoms vary widely from person to person and include:

- Abdominal pain or cramping, often relieved by passing wind or a bowel motion
- Diarrhoea or constipation, or alternating constipation and diarrhoea
- Feeling as though the bowel has not emptied properly after passing a bowel motion
- Feeling full or bloated
- Excessive intestinal gas (flatulence)
- Mucus in bowel motions.

IBS can be constipation-predominant, diarrhoea-predominant or cause alternating bouts of constipation and diarrhoea.

Most people have mild symptoms that come and go, but sometimes IBS symptoms can be severe and persistent and interfere significantly with daily activities.

IBS is more common in women than men and many women find their symptoms get worse during or around their menstrual period.

Although IBS can be uncomfortable or distressing, it does not damage the bowel and does not lead to other bowel diseases.

Causes

The exact cause of IBS is not known, but may involve altered function of nerves and muscles in the gastrointestinal tract. The symptoms of IBS seem to be related to hypersensitivity of the muscles that move food through the gastrointestinal tract. A tendency to IBS may be inherited.

Triggers

Things that can trigger or aggravate IBS symptoms include:

Stress – such as strong emotions (e.g., anger, fear) and stressful events. Worrying about the symptoms of IBS can make the symptoms worse. Some people with IBS have anxiety or depression and treatment of these conditions can relieve the symptoms of IBS

Food and drinks – Eating can make symptoms worse, as it stimulates intestinal muscles. Some people also find specific foods and drinks make their symptoms worse (e.g., fatty foods, spicy foods, foods that cause gas/bloating, dairy products, alcohol, caffeine and sugar-free sweeteners such as fructose and sorbitol)

Gut infections – For example, gastroenteritis or bowel infections

Medicines – Some medicines can worsen constipation (e.g., iron tablets, codeine, some antidepressants). Other medicines can worsen diarrhoea (e.g., laxatives, some antibiotics, some antidepressants). Ask a pharmacist.

Testing for IBS

The symptoms of IBS can also be symptoms of other gastrointestinal problems and a doctor can organise tests to investigate the cause of the symptoms. These tests may include a full medical check, blood tests, testing faeces and viewing the inside of the bowel by sigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy.

Self care

There is no cure for IBS and managing IBS involves managing the triggers and treating the symptoms. It can take time to find the best way to relieve particular symptoms and, in some cases, symptoms can be reduced but not completely eliminated.

- Try to identify IBS triggers – keep a record of your symptoms for several weeks, noting when they occur; what you were doing, eating and drinking before they started; your emotional state at the time and any medicines you were taking.
- Reduce caffeine intake (tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks).
- Reduce alcohol intake.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Try gradually changing the amount of fibre in your diet (e.g., a high fibre diet may help relieve constipation).
- Drink more water to help prevent constipation. Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' – unless a doctor advises otherwise.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week to help prevent constipation and relieve stress, and for heart health.
- Don't smoke.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress.

A doctor or pharmacist can help you develop a plan to manage your IBS symptoms.

Treatments

Treatments that may help relieve symptoms of IBS include counselling and psychological therapies (e.g., cognitive behaviour therapy), diet and lifestyle changes and some medicines. Medicines that may help relieve IBS symptoms include:

- Antispasm medicines (e.g., peppermint oil, mebeverine, hyoscine) may relieve abdominal pain and sometimes diarrhoea.
- Some antidepressant medicines may relieve abdominal pain.
- Certain anti-diarrhoea medicines (e.g., loperamide, cholestyramine) may relieve diarrhoea.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Important

Consult your doctor promptly if you have:

- A persistent change in your bowel habit
- Blood in your bowel motions or rectal bleeding
- Unexplained loss of weight or appetite
- Diarrhoea at night
- Constant or severe abdominal pain or pain waking you at night.

OR if you have IBS symptoms and:

- Are over 40 years or under 16 years of age
- A fever
- Have had bowel cancer or polyps
- A family history of bowel cancer, coeliac disease or inflammatory bowel disease.

- Regular fibre supplements often help constipation and sometimes diarrhoea.
- Certain laxatives may help constipation, although they generally have a limited role in IBS.
- Complementary and probiotic medicines may help some symptoms.

Some medicines for IBS are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Related fact cards

- *Anxiety*
- *Depression*
- *Constipation*
- *Fibre and Bowel Health*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

For more information

HEALTH/Insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

The Gastroenterological Society of Australia – phone (02)9256 5454 or website www.gesa.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.