



Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome or IBS is quite common with as many as 1 in 5 people affected. It is twice as common in women as men and happens most often to people in their 20s and 30s.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

IBS is an upset in the natural rhythm of the bowel. Symptoms can vary from person to person. The most common are alternating constipation and diarrhoea, abdominal pain or discomfort, bloating and wind. Other bowel symptoms include passing mucus, urgency, feeling relief from abdominal discomfort after going to the toilet, going to the toilet more (or less) often and change in stool appearance. Symptoms are usually worse after eating.

What causes IBS?

The actual cause of IBS is not known but may be linked to stress, a stressful life event, anxiety or depression. It may also happen after a stomach upset or a course of antibiotics when there can be a change of bacteria in the bowel.

What can I do to help?

First of all take a look at your overall diet and lifestyle habits and try to address the following points:

1. Eat Regularly

People with erratic eating patterns may find their symptoms improve when they start to eat more regularly. Avoid missing meals or leaving long gaps between eating. Try to eat small regular meals, take time to sit down and relax during mealtimes, and avoid over-indulging. Chew food well and avoid eating late at night.

2. Getting enough Fluids

Drink 8-10 glasses of fluid everyday especially water or other caffeine-free drinks such as herbal tea. Restrict caffeinated drinks such as cola and some energy drinks, and limit tea or coffee to three cups per day. Reduce intakes of alcohol and fizzy drinks.

3. Dietary Fibre

There are two main types of fibre:

- Insoluble fibre or 'roughage', which is a coarse, bulky fibre found in foods such as wholemeal bread, bran and high fibre cereals, and skins of fruit and vegetables
- Soluble fibre is a gel-like fibre found in oats, pulses and fruit and vegetables

Fibre intake should be adjusted according to its effect on symptoms. Deciding whether to increase or decrease soluble fibre depends on your individual symptoms.

If you do not usually eat much fibre, it is important to increase fibre very gradually – don't do everything on the first day. It is best to leave 1-2 days between each step to let your bowel get used to the extra fibre. Also make sure you take more fluids with the extra fibre.



If you suffer mainly from CONSTIPATION gradually introduce more foods high in both soluble and insoluble fibre into your diet:

- Take a high fibre cereal daily – e.g. porridge, branflakes, museli
- Include some beans, peas or lentils 3 to 4 times a week
- Take 5 portions of fruit and vegetables everyday – these can be in fresh, frozen, juice, soup, smoothie, or tinned form
- Try adding some seeds to cereal or yogurt e.g. linseed, sunflower, sesame or pumpkin seeds
- Add nuts to meals e.g. cashew nuts to stir fries, handful of peanuts as snack, walnuts to salad

If your symptoms are mainly DIARRHOEA the following may help:

- Fibre should be adjusted on individual basis – if you do not eat much fibre, try to increase gradually and monitor the effect. If you currently eat a high fibre diet, this may aggravate or worsen diarrhoea.
- Avoid Sorbitol (an artificial sweetener found in sugar-free or 'diet' sweets, gum, drinks and in some diabetic and slimming products)
- Limit foods that have been processed or re-cooked as they contain something called 'Resistant Starch'. Common dietary sources of resistant starch are cold or re-heated potatoes, oven chips, crisps, waffles, fried rice, dried pasta, cereal products containing modified starch e.g. cakes, biscuits and breakfast cereals, and partly baked or preheated bread e.g. garlic bread, pizza bases.

If you experience BLOATING OR WIND the following may help:

- Reducing insoluble fibre (e.g. wholegrain, bran, fruit & vegetable skins) may help to resolve symptoms. If this makes a clear difference to your symptoms, you can gradually reintroduce these foods until you find your own tolerance level. Limit fruit and vegetables to 3 portions a day.
- Include more insoluble fibre daily e.g. oats (e.g. porridge, oatcakes) and linseeds. Gradually build from 1 teaspoon per day to 1 tablespoon per day of linseed.
- Limit foods that have been processed or re-cooked as they contain something called 'resistant starch'. Common sources described above.

4. Take Regular Exercise

Whatever exercise you most enjoy most days of the week - e.g. swimming, walking, cycling, and yoga

5. Make time to relax

Stress is linked to IBS and finding a way to relieve stress can improve symptoms – for example a bath, reading, yoga, a massage or whatever you find relaxing.

6. Probiotics

These are helpful, live bacteria naturally found in some foods that *may* improve some symptoms of IBS. Look out for a yogurt with 'probiotic' or 'live' on the label. If one brand does not have an effect after one month, try an alternative because each brand contains a different strain of bacteria.



Coeliac Disease

If you have IBS, a blood test to screen for coeliac disease is recommended to rule out this life-long intolerance to gluten, which affects 1% of the population. Your GP can do this simple test for you.

Other Food Intolerances or Allergies

Food intolerances or allergies are sometimes, but not often, a cause of IBS. If you have tried improving your diet and lifestyle while monitoring the effect on your symptoms for at least 4 weeks and are not feeling any better, ask your GP to refer you to a Dietitian or consultant specialising in food allergies for testing. In preparation for this, keep a food and symptom diary to try and help identify the intolerance.

Further information

For further advice on food and IBS contact a Dietitian at the Specialist Consultant section of the INDI website – www.indi.ie

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