



Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome or IBS is quite common with between 1 in 3 to 1 in 5 people affected. IBS is an upset in the natural rhythm of the bowel. When you swallow, the food is carried to your stomach and then on through the bowel on a wave of muscle that squeezes the food through. Imagine squeezing a raw sausage and you will get the idea. This wave of muscle follows a particular rhythm and if this rhythm is upset you will get the symptoms of IBS. If the rhythm speeds up you will find you get more diarrhoea or loose bowel movements and if it slows down you will get more constipation and bloating. Some people will find they get both sets of symptoms at different times as the rhythm can speed up or slow down and go through phases where it behaves normally.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

These can vary from person to person. They include: constipation, diarrhoea, abdominal cramps, bloating, passing more wind than normal, heartburn and nausea. Not everyone gets every symptom and they can come and go. Remember other problems, such as coeliac disease, can cause these symptoms so it is always important that you are checked out by your GP to make sure it is IBS you have and nothing else.

What causes IBS?

The actual cause of IBS is not known but eating a diet low in fibre and stress may play a role. IBS may also be caused by an upset in the balance of good and bad bacteria in your bowel.

What can I do to help?

Eating Regularly

People with erratic eating patterns may find their symptoms improve when they start to eat more regularly. Try to eat small regular meals, avoid missing meals and avoid over-indulging.

What Dietary Changes?

1. A good place to start is to eat some probiotic yoghurt /drinks everyday. The good bacteria that are in probiotic yoghurts help to regulate the rhythm of the bowel and to keep it in good working order. Look for yoghurt or yoghurt drinks labelled 'probiotic' or 'live'.
2. Increase the amount of soluble fibre you eat. There are two main types of fibre: insoluble fibre or roughage, which is found in wholegrain foods such as wholemeal bread and high fibre cereals, and soluble fibre which is found in oats, pulses and fruit and vegetables. Soluble fibre will help whether you have constipation or diarrhoea.
 - Try having some porridge most days and include some beans, peas or lentils 3 or 4 times a week.



- Make sure you are taking at least 3 pieces of fruit and 2 portions of vegetables everyday.
 - Try adding some seeds to your cereal or yoghurt. Linseeds are especially good for the bowel, try taking 1 teaspoon a day at the start and gradually working up to 1 tablespoon a day. Other seeds include sunflower, sesame and pumpkin seeds.
 - If you normally don't eat much fibre, it is important that you 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.
3. Drink plenty of water. You need about 8 glasses of water everyday for good health and especially if you increase the amount of fibre you are eating. Fibre works by soaking up water in the bowel to become soft and easy to move. If you eat more fibre but don't increase the amount of water you drink you may feel worse than you did at the start!
 4. Stress is thought to be a cause of IBS – we all know the feeling of 'butterflies in the stomach' before an exam or interview. When you are stressed the way the body sends blood to the bowel changes and the bowel does not get as much blood as normal. If you are stressed for a long period of time it can mean that your bowel is not working at its best. Try to do something most days to relax as this will get the blood back into the bowel. Try having a bath, going for a walk or reading, or whatever you find relaxing.
 5. Food allergies are rarely a cause of IBS. It is always worth trying to increase fibre and probiotics before looking at food allergies as a possible cause. If you have tried fibre and probiotics and are not feeling any better, ask your GP to refer you to a dietitian or a consultant who specialises in food allergies to be tested.

Foods to avoid?

There are very few foods that cause IBS but some can upset the rhythm of the bowel. Too much caffeine can stimulate the bowel, causing diarrhoea. Keep coffee to about 2 cups a day and tea to about 3 cups a day or go for decaffeinated drinks. Cola drinks are also high in caffeine so keep these to one glass a day or less. Sorbitol, a sweetener found in some foods and in some chewing gum can cause diarrhoea if you eat too much of it. Check the ingredients of your foods to see if you are eating sorbitol. Alcohol also has a laxative effect – many people with IBS find they have diarrhoea after drinking alcohol. Usually reducing the amount you drink at a time will help.

Remember it can take 6 weeks to 3 months for your irritable bowel to get completely better when you change your diet or lifestyle so you need to give it some time to get well. You may find your symptoms get a little worse for the first week or two that you increase fibre, but this is normal and it should improve. If it is severe or there is no improvement, contact your dietitian or GP for further advice.

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

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