



International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders

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Frequently Asked Questions About Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

What is IBS?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a long-term or recurring disorder of gastrointestinal functioning. It usually involves the large (colon) and small intestine with disturbances of intestinal/gut motility (motor function), sensation, and secretion.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

IBS can produce symptoms of abdominal pain or discomfort, bloating or a sense of gaseousness, and altered bowel habits (diarrhea and/or constipation). Abdominal pain and/or discomfort is the key symptom of IBS and is often relieved or reduced with a bowel movement. Symptoms can come and go, and even change, over time.

How is IBS diagnosed?

The starting point of the diagnosis is a detailed history or interview and a physical examination. Diagnosis of IBS involves identifying certain symptoms typical of the disorder, and excluding other medical conditions that may have similar symptoms. The symptom-based Rome diagnostic criteria for IBS emphasize a “positive diagnosis” rather than exhaustive tests to exclude other diseases.

Are there tests to confirm irritable bowel syndrome?

There are no physical findings or tests that confirm the diagnosis of IBS. Laboratory blood and stool tests, x-rays, and endoscopic procedures (such as colonoscopy) are used not to make the diagnosis, but to rule out other diseases of the bowel, which can present with similar symptoms.

How common is IBS?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is the most common functional gastrointestinal (GI) disorder with world wide prevalence rates ranging from 9–23%.

What causes IBS?

This is not yet completely understood. In IBS there is an altered pattern of muscle contraction in the colon and increased sensitivity within the gastrointestinal tract, as well as a tendency for the bowel to be overly reactive to various triggers such as eating, emotional arousal, gastrointestinal infections, menstrual period, or gaseous distension. In IBS, normal regulation of the communication between the brain and the gut becomes altered, which leads to changes in normal bowel function.

Will my IBS symptoms resolve?

Each year, approximately 10% of IBS patients get better. This suggests that most people with IBS will eventually get better, but this is not true for every person.

Does diet cause IBS?

Diet does not cause IBS. Nevertheless, dietary factors may worsen symptoms in some people. In IBS, the bowel may over-react to stimuli. Even the act of eating, and not a particular food, may aggravate symptoms at times.

Do certain foods affect symptoms?

This varies from person to person. Certain foods are known to stimulate the gut in general, and in those with IBS eating too much of these might worsen symptoms. Maintaining a food and symptom diary for a minimum of one to two weeks can help identify triggering foods.

How is IBS treated?

The first line of treatment for IBS includes establishing an effective patient-physician relationship, obtaining education about IBS, and making lifestyle changes which may be associated with symptoms. If these steps do not relieve symptoms, various medications may be helpful. If lifestyle changes and careful use of medications are not enough, consider seeing a doctor who specializes in motility and stress-related gastrointestinal disorders. A strong partnership between a knowledgeable patient and an empathetic, knowledgeable health care provider can produce significant improvement and control over symptoms for individuals with IBS.

What is the relationship of stress to IBS?

Stress does not cause IBS, but it may influence symptoms. Stress is the body's normal response to stimuli, or stressors. It has been shown to increase motility and sensation of the colon to a greater degree in IBS patients compared to healthy individuals without IBS.

One way to understand IBS is that there's a dysregulation in the way the brain and the gut are functioning with each other. Stress may modify signals between the brain and the intestinal tract. Factors that might normally affect the bowel might then affect it more; there's an increased response of the bowel. The stress factors could be physical, dietary, psychological, or environmental. Women who have their period are going through a cycle where hormonal changes occur and this can have an effect. A person with IBS might eat a regular meal and experience a bowel problem. For them, it's an overreaction of the bowel to the stressors.

Where can I learn more about IBS?

To learn more about IBS or other digestive disorders we invite you to request a complementary information packet from the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). Visit our Web site, www.aboutIBS.org, or call us toll-free in the U.S. at 1-888-964-2001. You also can email us at iffgd@iffgd.org.