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## **IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME**

### **Simple measures often relieve symptoms.**

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a baffling medical problem. Though you may have episodes of intense abdominal pain, tests may fail to uncover anything wrong. In the past, physicians tended to minimize the symptoms of IBS. "They'd tell people, "Tests show you don't have colon cancer or colitis. All you have is dysfunction", says Sidney F. Phillips, a Mayo Clinic gastroenterologist. "That's changed. Now we're saying, 'Yes, I know what you have. IBS is the most common reason patients come to me. Let's work together to minimize your symptoms.' This attitude itself can be extremely helpful" according to Dr. Phillips.

### **What is IBS?**

IBS is a disorder in how your bowel works. It's annoying, painful and sometimes embarrassing, but not life threatening and certainly not uncommon. About one in five adult Americans have symptoms of IBS; less than half of these people seek help. Some physicians tank the disorder with the common cold as a major cause of time lost from work.

In the United States, two to four times more women are treated for IBS than men. That's probably because women tend to seek medical help more frequently than men.

Stress and depression are often blamed as causes of IBS. But, these emotions only aggravate the condition. The true cause of IBS is unknown.

Symptoms, which may include abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation and gas, probably are caused by muscle spasms in the walls of your stomach or bowel.

Although bowel movements temporarily relieve the pain, you may feel as if you can't empty your bowel completely. Your stools can be ribbon like and laced with mucus, or they can be hard, dry pellets. You may have nausea and bloating too, unfortunately there is no proven way to prevent IBS.

### **What can you do about it?**

If you have symptoms of IBS, see your physician. Only your doctor can say for sure if your problem is IBS and not cancer, gallbladder disease, an ulcer or another digestive system condition with similar symptoms. You often need treatment for years. "IBS waxes and wanes" says Dr. Phillips. "And no single treatment puts everything right." But there is good news: Simple measures often relieve symptoms.

## What can you do about it? (Continued)

For example, pay attention to eating habits that seem to irritate your IBS, and change your ways if necessary. It may help to eat on a more regular schedule. Don't overeat and don't eat on the run. Slow down. Enjoy your food. Urgency and overeating can aggravate bowel irregularity. In addition to these measures, your doctor and registered dietitian may recommend the following:

**Add Fiber to your diet-** Fiber prevents constipation. Sources include fruits, vegetables, bran and other whole grains and legumes such as kidney, pinto and garbanzo beans. Because fiber can cause gas, especially when you first increase fiber in your diet, add it gradually. This may minimize potential problems with gas. If adding fiber doesn't help prevent constipation, try fiber supplements containing psyllium (SIL-ee-um), such as Metamucil or Konsyl. These agents are no better than a high-fiber diet, but you may tolerate them better.

**Avoid substances that irritate your bowel-** Common irritants include tobacco, alcohol, caffeine, spicy foods, concentrated juices (such as orange juice) and raw vegetables. They can cause diarrhea.

**Also avoid fatty foods-** "Fat stimulates your bowels more than any other food" says Dr. Phillips

**Limit dairy products-** Occasionally, milk can cause abdominal cramping, gas and diarrhea, especially if you lack adequate amounts of lactase, an intestinal enzyme that you need to digest milk sugar.

**Avoid dietetic sweeteners-** Sweeteners such as sorbitol or mannitol, often present in sugar-free candy, gum and dietetic foods can cause diarrhea.

But remember this about your diet: What foods work for others may not work for you. Trial and error is your best approach. Eat the foods that best agree with you, based on your personal experience. Your physician may also advise you to avoid medications that irritate your bowel. Or, he or she may suggest ways to manage stress or depression. Tension relieving activities such as sports, hobbies or regular physical exercise can help. Your doctor might suggest walking for 20 or 30 minutes 3 times a week, or swimming on a similar schedule.

Remember, if you are 40 years old or older, check with your doctor before beginning an exercise program.

## A Medication may help.

If simple treatment measures don't help, your physician may recommend drug therapy. For abdominal pain, your doctor may prescribe dicyclomine hydrochloride (Bentyl), cinoxide (Librax), or a comparable medication designed to relieve muscle spasms. These muscle relaxants are not for daily use, only to help relieve periodic symptoms. Dr. Phillips says of all IBS symptoms, the urgency of diarrhea often is the most bothersome because it curtails activities. "For example, a person may be apprehensive about going shopping or out to dinner if he or she is not sure where the bathrooms are." To prevent or treat diarrhea, your doctor may recommend an over-the-counter medication such as loperamide (Imodium).

IBS is a disorder that doesn't disappear easily, but take a positive approach. With help from your physician and register dietician, you can adopt diet and lifestyle changes that can help keep symptoms in check, usually without drugs.