

## **Irritable Bowel Syndrome**

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is “a functional bowel disorder in which abdominal pain or discomfort is associated with defecation or a change in bowel habit, and with features of disordered defecation”. It is a chronic and debilitating disorder that affects 9 – 23% of the population across the world. Whilst it does not cause damage to your bowel, it can be distressing, make you feel miserable and significantly interfere with your quality of life.

### **Symptoms**

It encompasses a variety of symptoms, which vary from one person to another. The most common symptoms are:

- Abdominal pain, often relieved after passing wind or opening bowels
- Bloating
- Altered bowel habit, diarrhoea and or constipation
- An urgent need to go to the toilet

Other symptoms may include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Loss of appetite
- Lethargy
- Excessive wind / belching

Symptoms may worsen during menstruation in women.

Passing blood is not a symptom of IBS – should this happen, it is important to consult your doctor.

### **Cause of IBS**

Although IBS is common, the cause is poorly understood and there may be many factors involved. The evidence to date suggests that the predominant underlying cause lies in the nervous system, relating to or situated in the intestine, manifesting as gut hypersensitivity, low-grade mucosal inflammation, disturbed colonic motility and previous gastrointestinal infection.

### **How is IBS diagnosed?**

There are no tests that can diagnose IBS. Your GP will assess your symptoms and carry out blood tests to rule out other digestive conditions, as symptoms can be very similar to other disorders such as inflammatory bowel disease or coeliac disease.

### **Treatment**

Generally, dietary changes are usually the first line of treatment. Try and follow the ‘Golden Rules’:

- Eat three regular meals a day – avoid skipping meals
- Sit down to each meal and chew food well
- Avoid eating main meal later at night
- Include five portions of fruit and vegetables in your diet and spread them out during the day

- Steer clear from rich and fatty foods such as fast food, pies, chips, fatty meats, butter and creamy sauces
- Aim to drink 8 - 10 glasses of fluid per day, (less than half of this should come from tea, coffee or fizzy drinks, as these may worsen symptoms). Water, sugar free squash and herbal teas are preferable
- Relax. Set aside leisure time each day
- Limit alcohol intake to no more than two units per day and have at least two alcohol free days a week
- Take regular exercise e.g. walking, swimming - recommendation five x half hour walks per week.

### Dietary changes according to your symptoms

Altering the type of fibre in your diet can often help your symptoms. There are two main types of fibre:

- **Soluble fibre** is found in fruit and vegetables, peas, beans, lentils, oats, barley, nuts and seeds
- **Insoluble fibre** is found in wholemeal/whole wheat breads, cereals, pasta and rice, skins of potatoes, fruit and vegetables and nuts and seeds

### Make dietary changes according to your symptoms

Refer to the table below to personalise the advice

Wind and bloating	Constipation	Diarrhoea
Include a maximum of 3 portions of fruit a day and spread them throughout the day	Ensure you're drinking enough non-caffeine fluids and aim for 1.5-2L a day	Ensure you're drinking at least 2L of fluid a day and limit fruit juice to some small glass a day
Limit fruit juice to one small glass per serving	Choose wholegrain breads and cereals and eat more fruit and vegetables. Increase your fibre intake slowly. Add a new fibre food every 1-2 days so your bowel can adapt to the extra fibre	Reduce your fibre intake if you eat a lot of whole wheat breads and cereals. Choose white alternatives instead
Reduce insoluble fibre such as bran and wholemeal bread but include more soluble fibre oats and barley	Add ground or whole linseeds to breakfast cereal, salad, yoghurt, fruit juice or yoghurt. Start with 1 teaspoon, increasing to 1 tablespoon per day over time and as tolerated. It's important to drink 1 cup of fluid (150ml) with each tablespoon of seeds	Avoid artificial sweeteners and, sugar-free sweets, mints and gum containing sorbitol, mannitol and xylitol

Cut down on alcohol as this can often make symptoms worse	Don't use wheat bran as this may make your symptoms worse	Lactose can sometimes cause diarrhoea. Use lactose free cows milk, yoghurts, cream and cheeses instead for two to four weeks. If it makes no difference then return to using ordinary milk and dairy products
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### **Probiotics**

You may wish to try probiotics, either the yoghurts, fermented milk drinks, tablets or powders. If you choose to try one of these products, include it daily for at least four weeks at the dose recommended by the manufacturer. If you don't see an improvement, then you may wish to try an alternative brand.

### **If your symptoms persist?**

If you still don't see an improvement in your symptoms four weeks after making these changes, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian. They may advise that you to follow a diet with reduced short-chain fermentable carbohydrates (also known as a low FODMAP diet). Recent research suggests that a diet low in fermentable carbohydrates can improve IBS symptoms. This is a very tricky diet and should only be followed with specialist advice from a dietitian who is trained in it.

For more information, please contact Emer