

DO YOU HAVE IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?



Dr. Rohit Jindal

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common chronic disorder of the digestive system. Its main symptoms are abdominal pain, cramping, bloating, gas, diarrhea and constipation. There is no identifiable cause for these symptoms in IBS.

IBS is the most commonly diagnosed gastrointestinal condition. Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from this disorder. As many as one in five adults has symptoms related to IBS; however, less than a third of such people seek medical help. It is important to see a medical expert if there is a persistent change in bowel pattern or if there are other signs or symptoms of IBS because a more serious condition, such as colon cancer or inflammatory bowel disease, needs to be ruled out. Also, although IBS by itself does not cause permanent damage to the intestines, the symptoms can cause significant distress, and medical treatment may be helpful.

Despite extensive research, it is not completely understood what causes IBS. Normally, the intestines contract and relax in a coordinated manner as the food moves from the stomach through the intestinal tract to the rectum. In IBS, the contractions may be stronger and last longer than normal, resulting in gas, bloating and diarrhea. In some people, the contractions may slow down, leading to constipation and hard, dry stools.

IBS is known to develop in some people after a severe intestinal infection. Food intolerances are common in patients with IBS, which is the basis of the theory that it can be caused by sensitivity or allergy to particular foods. Eliminating certain food groups systematically under the supervision of a specialist might help to detect if the symptoms of IBS are related to food sensitivity. People with IBS are more likely to suffer from anxiety and stress, but anxiety and stress are probably not the causes for IBS.

It has been suggested that in IBS, there is an increased sensitivity of the intestines to usual sensations. Nerves in the bowel

will may overreact in people with IBS, such that pain may be caused by normal amounts of gas or movement of the intestine. This theory is supported by the finding that some people with severe IBS feel better on medications that decrease the perception of pain in the intestines.

IBS usually begins at a young age and most people have symptoms before the age of 35 years; however, it can start at a later age. People with a family history of IBS are at an increased risk of the condition. The abdominal pain is typically crampy, variable in intensity, usually in the lower abdomen, and often relieved after having a bowel movement. Some women with IBS may notice an association between IBS symptoms and their menstrual cycle.

Clinicians diagnose IBS on the basis of a patient's symptoms after ruling out more serious conditions like Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis and colon cancer. Routine blood tests, imaging studies, endoscopy and colonoscopy may help to rule out these other conditions with similar presentation.

Many different treatments, including monitoring of symptoms, adjustment of the diet, increased fiber, psychosocial therapy and medications, are available to relieve the symptoms of IBS. The treatment often needs to be individualized for each person, usually involves more than one modality and is best done in the care of a specialist. A number of herbal and natural therapies are often advertised for the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome; however, none of these therapies has proven effective, and they are not recommended.

Even though IBS can cause pain and distress, most people are able to achieve control of their symptoms and live a normal life without serious medical problems.



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