

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common medical condition of the large intestine (colon). Normally, a healthy colon keeps its contents moving through it with a regular rhythm. With IBS, the rhythm of your colon speeds up, causing diarrhea, or slows down, causing constipation.

IBS is a chronic condition, meaning it doesn't go away completely. The good news is most people with IBS can learn how to manage it and reduce their symptoms. IBS does *not* increase your chances of having cancer or permanent colon damage.

What causes IBS?

Researchers don't know exactly what causes IBS. It may be caused by problems with your nerves, hormones, or certain bacteria (germs) in the colon. A few things are known to cause symptoms in people with IBS, though. These include:

- Anxiety and stress
- Certain foods, including milk products, fatty foods, chocolate, alcohol, and drinks containing caffeine

Anyone can get IBS, but it's most common in people who are younger than 35, female, or have a parent or sibling who has IBS.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of IBS can vary from person to person, but they most often include:

- Abdominal (belly) pain or cramping
- Diarrhea, constipation, or both
- Change in the consistency of your stool (poop), or how often you have to go to the bathroom
- Mucus in your stool
- Bloating



How is it diagnosed?

There is not a specific test for IBS. If you have symptoms, your doctor will start by taking a medical history and doing a physical exam.

Your doctor will also need to make sure your symptoms aren't caused by another health problem. For this reason you will likely have a number of tests. These may include blood tests or a test of your stool sample. You may also have a test to look inside your colon (a **colonoscopy** or **sigmoidoscopy**). If these tests don't show you have another condition, your doctor may tell you that you have IBS.

How is IBS treated?

Mild IBS is usually treated by changing your diet and lifestyle. These changes help manage your symptoms and relieve stress. If your IBS is more serious, your doctor may recommend certain medicines.

Your doctor may also recommend that you:

- Keep track of your symptoms.** Different things cause symptoms in different people. It's important to learn what causes *your* symptoms. This will help you know what changes can help your symptoms the most. For a few weeks, keep track of these things every day:
 - What you ate
 - What you did
 - Number and appearance of bowel movements (poop)
 - How you felt
- Stop eating foods that may cause symptoms.** Have your doctor help you decide which foods to cut out. Many doctors recommend cutting out these foods:
 - Milk products (lactose). Start by cutting out all milk products for 2 weeks. If this helps, continue to avoid these foods.
 - Foods that cause gas, such as beans, or certain raw vegetables, such as cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, and brussels sprouts.
 - Alcohol, chocolate, carbonated drinks, coffee, and sugar-free sweeteners.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables** — or take a fiber supplement. Eating more fiber has different effects on different people, though. If this makes your symptoms worse, stop.
- Exercise regularly.** Exercise helps your colon work in a normal rhythm, and it helps relieve stress. If you've been less active, build up your exercise a little at a time.

- Reduce stress.** Talk openly with your doctor about what may be causing stress in your life and what might help. Many people can reduce stress with:
 - Daily exercise
 - A support group
 - Psychological therapies, such as counseling or cognitive behavioral therapy
- Take medicines as your doctor recommends.** Medicines won't cure IBS, but they may reduce your symptoms. They are usually considered after changes in diet and exercise have been tried and not worked well enough. Your doctor may recommend one of these medicines:
 - Medicines to ease diarrhea or constipation.
 - Antidepressants, which can ease pain and stress. These are given in very small doses when used to treat IBS.
 - Herbal remedies are *not* recommended for IBS.



When should I call a doctor?

Contact your doctor if you have any of these symptoms:

- Bleeding from your rectum
- Nausea and vomiting
- Ongoing diarrhea or constipation
- Trouble swallowing
- Shortness of breath after a meal
- Abdominal (belly) pain that does not improve after a bowel movement (pooping)
- Unexplained weight loss

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