

Your doctor has diagnosed a condition called irritable bowel syndrome (or IBS) which causes abdominal pain and an abnormal bowel habit and bloating. Some people suffer constipation, some have diarrhoea and some alternate between the two. The pain may get better or worse when you open your bowels.

IBS is a very common problem: One in five Australians have these symptoms at some time but some people suffer much more than others. IBS is more common in women, often comes on in the late teens or early twenties and may come and go over a person's life. Symptoms can be more troublesome before a woman's period.

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People have different concerns when they see their doctor. Some people want pain relief or an improvement in bowel habit. Others want to understand why they have these problems and to be reassured that there is nothing seriously wrong. It is worthwhile thinking about what you want from your doctor.

What causes IBS?

No one knows for sure but the symptoms may be due to a combination of increased sensitivity to the function of the bowel, which can be responsible for discomfort, and abnormal contractions in the bowel muscle.

Do you have a good diet?

Aim to eat the following amounts of these food groups each day:

- * brown or wholemeal breads, high fibre cereals, rice pasta, legumes: 4 or more serves
- * dairy products: 3 serves
- * fruit: 2 Or 3 pieces
- * vegetables: 5 serves
- * meat, cheese, poultry and fish: 1 or 2 serves

AND drink 8 glasses of water, teas or juices a day.

Why does this happen?

Again, no one knows for sure. Sometimes these problems come on after a gut infection such as gastroenteritis or food poisoning or even a course of antibiotics. However, in most cases no cause can be found.

What tests will I need?

If your symptoms are typical, you may not need any tests at all. However, if there is any doubt or you are over 40 years old when you develop symptoms or have a family history of bowel cancer, coeliac disease (an intolerance to wheat) or inflammatory bowel disease you may need blood tests and a colonoscopy, which is an examination of the large bowel.

Is my lifestyle causing IBS?

May be. You need to have a think about your diet, exercise habits and how much alcohol or coffee you drink. Sometimes smoking can make the problem worse. It is worthwhile improving your diet if possible.

You should aim to have a serving of breakfast cereal every morning, at least five servings of fruit and vegetables throughout the day, three servings of dairy foods which contain calcium as well as six to eight glasses of water, teas or juices per day.

A healthy diet contains 25 to 30gm of fibre per day. If your diet is low in fibre you should try to gradually increase it with high fibre foods.

If you introduce more fibre too quickly it can cause bloating and discomfort.

Sweeteners in sugar-free gum and cordials give some people IBS symptoms. People who can't digest milk can develop abdominal pain and diarrhoea. It is worthwhile considering whether or not you have these problems.

Is it stress?

Many people know their IBS is worse if they are stressed. If that is the case you may need to look at ways to reduce or manage your stress levels. IBS can respond to treatment aimed directly at stress such as hypnotherapy, relaxation therapy and behaviour therapy. If you are very anxious or depressed or are having trouble sleeping, this may be making IBS worse and you need to discuss these problems with your doctor. Some people with IBS have suffered a great deal of emotional stress, such as sexual abuse or the death of a parent, in the past. This may need to be dealt with before the physical problems improve.

How do you treat IBS?

Many people are happy not to have any medical treatment once they know what is causing their symptoms. However, if you have a lot of pain or your bowel troubles are dominating your life, there are things that can be done. Different treatments work for different types of IBS and you need to describe your symptoms to your doctor. You may choose to take medication only at times that your IBS is 'playing up'.

If your main problem is pain you may benefit from a medication that reduces bowel spasm.

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Constipation predominant IBS

If you suffer constipation and bloating you may benefit from taking a regular fibre supplement or laxative. Your doctor may prescribe a medication.

Diarrhoea predominant IBS

If diarrhoea is your main problem you may benefit from taking a medication to firm up the motion. Fibre supplements can also help some people with diarrhoea.

Can IBS cause another disease?

No. IBS can't become another disease such as bowel cancer. However, bowel cancer is common in Australia: It occurs in one in 18 men and one in 26 women so, if you are concerned about this, discuss it with your doctor. People with IBS report more headaches, period pain, fibromyalgia and urinary symptoms. The reason for this is not clear.

What symptoms are not due to IBS?

Bleeding from the back passage, weight loss, fever or severe diarrhoea at night are not due to IBS. If you have these problems further tests will be necessary.

Can IBS be cured?

Your doctor cannot cure IBS but between the two of you, you will be able to develop a lifestyle programme and perhaps a medication plan to control your symptoms when need be. You are not alone.

Digestive Health Foundation

The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is committed to promoting better health for all Australians through education and community health programs related to the digestive system. The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia (GESA). GESA is the professional body representing the specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in gastrointestinal disorders. GI disorders are the most common health related problems affecting the community.

Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.

Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website.

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facts about...

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME



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