Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

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Summary

- Irritable bowel syndrome is characterised by abdominal pain, bloating and alternating constipation and diarrhoea.
- The cause is unknown, but environmental factors – such as changes of routine, emotional stress, infection and diet – can trigger an attack.
- Treatment options include careful changes to diet over a period of time, laxatives or antidiarrhoea medication, and antispasmodics.

Symptoms of IBS

Some of the more common signs of irritable bowel syndrome include:

- abdominal pain or cramping that is often relieved by passing wind or faeces
- alternating diarrhoea and constipation
- a sensation that the bowels are not fully emptied after passing a motion
- abdominal bloating
- mucus present in the stools
- nausea.

None of these symptoms are exclusive to IBS. It is unusual for IBS to produce these symptoms, for the first time, after the age of 40.

Main IBS categories

Irritable bowel syndrome can be subdivided into three major categories:

- Constipation-predominant – the person tends to alternate constipation with normal stools. Symptoms of abdominal cramping or aching are commonly triggered by eating.
- Diarrhoea-predominant – the person tends to experience diarrhoea first thing in the morning or after eating. The need to go to the toilet is typically urgent and cannot be delayed. Incontinence may be a problem.
- Alternating constipation and diarrhoea.

Causes of IBS

The underlying cause of irritable bowel syndrome is still unknown, but certain factors have been found to 'trigger' attacks in susceptible individuals. These include:

- Infection – an episode of gastroenteritis will often result in persistent bowel symptoms, long after the offending bacteria or virus has been eliminated. The cause of this is unknown, but may involve changes to nerve function in the bowel or changes in the normal bacterial population of the bowel. Up to 25 per cent of IBS may be due to this problem.
- Food intolerance – impaired absorption of the sugar lactose (found in dairy and many processed foods) is the most common dietary trigger for IBS. Other sugars believed to trigger IBS are fructose (present in many syrups) and sorbitol.
- General diet – low-fibre diets can exacerbate the constipation of constipation-predominant IBS. Some people find spicy or sugary foods cause problems. However, many experts are sceptical about the role of general diet, once specific food intolerances have been eliminated.
- Emotional stress – strong emotions, such as anxiety or stress, can affect the nerves of the bowel in susceptible people.
- Medication – certain types (such as antibiotics, antacids and painkillers) can lead to constipation or diarrhoea.
Diagnosis of IBS

If you suspect you have irritable bowel syndrome, it is important to seek medical advice to make sure your symptoms aren’t caused by any other illness, such as diverticulitis, inflammatory bowel disease or polyps. Coeliac disease (an immune intolerance to gluten, present in wheat and other grains) may produce many of the same symptoms as IBS. Lactose intolerance may produce bloating, cramps and diarrhoea.

Diagnosis methods include:

- full medical check-up
- blood tests, including blood tests for coeliac disease
- stool tests
- investigation of the bowel lining by inserting a small tube (sigmoidoscopy)
- investigation of the bowel under sedation (colonoscopy) or barium enema, if necessary.

Treatment for IBS

IBS cannot be cured with medication or special diets. The primary preventative measure is to identify and avoid individual triggers. Treatment options may include:

- a modest increase in dietary fibre, together with plenty of clear fluids
- reducing or eliminating common gas-producing foods, such as beans and cabbage
- reducing or eliminating dairy foods, if lactose intolerance is a trigger
- antidiarrhoea medication, such as imodium or lomotil – these can be an essential part of management in those with diarrhoea-predominant IBS
- pain-relieving medication – opiates such as codeine can provide effective pain relief. One of their most common side effects, constipation, may also relieve the diarrhoea of diarrhoea-predominant IBS
- treatments to treat constipation
- antispasmodic drugs, which may ease cramping – examples include mebeverine, belladonna, hyoscine and peppermint oil capsules
- tricyclic antidepressants – these can be effective in treating the pain of IBS, but are best prescribed for a trial period with monitoring of symptoms. Use of these does not mean that IBS is caused by depression
- stress management, if stress seems to be triggering the attacks
- establishing eating routines and avoiding sudden changes of routine.

A group of carbohydrates called FODMAP is now believed to contribute strongly to symptoms of IBS in many people. A low-FODMAP diet can be tried in these instances. This diet can be commenced with the supervision of a dietitian experienced in management of IBS.

Specific treatments for IBS are not approved for use

A small number of medications have been developed to treat IBS and have been shown to be effective in selected groups in clinical trials. These work on the interaction between serotonin and nerve cells of the colon. They include alosetron, cilansetron and tegaserod. Safety concerns with these three medications has led to their withdrawal from the market, or restricted use only, and none are presently licensed in Australia.

Find an experienced health professional

People with IBS can become frustrated and feel their symptoms are not treated seriously. These frustrations, along with sometimes inappropriate therapy, can often make the symptoms worse. Finding a therapist with experience in the successful treatment of IBS is important.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Irritable Bowel Information and Support Association Tel. (07) 3372 2091
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942

Things to remember

- Irritable bowel syndrome is characterised by abdominal pain, bloating and alternating constipation and diarrhoea.
- The cause is unknown, but environmental factors – such as changes of routine, emotional stress, infection and diet – can trigger an attack.
- Treatment options include careful changes to diet over a period of time, laxatives or antidiarrhoeals, and antispasmodics.

References

- Low FODMAP diet for irritable bowel syndrome, Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University. More information here.

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More information

Digestive system

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as
Active Tab

- Digestive system explained
- Oesophagus
- Stomach
- Small intestine
- Large intestine
- Rectum
- Liver and gallbladder
- Pancreas

Digestive system explained

- Barium tests
  Barium tests are used to examine conditions of the digestive tract such as reflux, narrowing or ulceration...
- Digestive system explained
  The digestive tract can be thought of as a long muscular tube with digestive organs attached along the way...
- Fibre in food
  A diet high in fibre keeps the digestive system healthy...

Oesophagus

- Barrett's oesophagus
  Symptoms of Barrett's oesophagus are similar to regular heartburn, which means many people don't seek treatment until their condition is quite advanced...
- Digestive tract birth defects
  Too much amniotic fluid surrounding the baby during pregnancy (polyhydramnios) may indicate the presence of defects of the digestive tract...
- Hiccups
  Hiccups that last for days, weeks or even years may be symptomatic of underlying disease...
- Indigestion
  Food inside the stomach is only kept there by the force of gravity so to avoid heartburn, don't lie down after a big meal...
- Throat cancer
  Risk factors for throat cancer include smoking and heavy alcohol consumption...

Stomach

- Abdominal pain in children
  Children may feel stomach pain for a range of reasons and may need treatment...
- Gastritis
  Gastritis may be caused by many factors including infection, alcohol, particular medications and some allergic and immune conditions...
- Hernias
  Both reducible and non-reducible hernias need to be surgically repaired - this is a common operation...
- Peritonitis
  Peritonitis is a life-threatening emergency that needs prompt medical treatment...
- Stomach cancer
  The symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and can be common to other medical conditions...
- Stomach ulcer
Most stomach ulcers are caused by infection or medication, not stress or poor diet.

Small intestine

• Coeliac disease and gluten sensitivity
  Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten.

• Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis
  When people with inflammatory bowel disease are not experiencing a flare-up of their illness, they feel quite well and are often free of symptoms.

• Gastroenteritis
  It is important to establish the cause of gastro, as different types of gastroenteritis respond to different treatments.

• Gastroenteritis - amoebiasis
  Amoebiasis can cause diarrhoea among travellers to developing countries.

• Gastroenteritis - campylobacteriosis
  Campylobacteriosis is a type of gastroenteritis and is more common in children under five years of age and young adults.

• Gastroenteritis - cryptosporidiosis
  Outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis have been associated with child care centres, public swimming pools and contaminated water supplies.

• Gastroenteritis - giardiasis
  Most people infected with Giardia parasites do not develop symptoms but can still spread the infection to others.

• Gastroenteritis in children
  Gastroenteritis or Gastro can be dangerous for very young babies. Gastro is common in young children and spreads easily. Gastro is a bowel infection which causes diarrhoea (runny or watery poo) and...

• Gastroenteritis - salmonellosis
  You may be more prone to salmonellosis if you are elderly, have another medical condition (such as a weakened immune system) or are malnourished.

• Gastroenteritis - shigellosis
  Outbreaks of shigellosis gastroenteritis can occur in institutional settings, particularly where children are still in nappies or adults are incontinent.

• Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
  Irritable bowel syndrome can't be cured with medications or special diets but avoiding individual triggers can help prevent it.

• Pets – safe handling of reptiles and tropical fish
  People in contact with tropical fish and reptiles such as turtles, lizards and snakes may be at risk of infections and illness due to germs (such as bacteria, viruses and parasites) carried on the...

• Rotavirus
  Rotavirus is a common cause of viral gastroenteritis for Australian babies and preschool children.

• Traveller's diarrhoea
  The risk of traveller's diarrhoea is higher where sanitation and hygiene standards are poor.

Large intestine

• Appendicitis
  Anyone of any age can be struck by appendicitis, but it seems to be more common during childhood and adolescence.

• Botulism
  Botulism is considered a medical emergency. If untreated, it may cause death.

• Bowel cancer
  Bowel cancer is highly curable if found at an early stage.

• Bowel motions
  Many illnesses and events can affect the colour and texture of faeces.

• Collagenous colitis and lymphocytic colitis
Collagenous colitis and lymphocytic colitis are types of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

- **Constipation**
  Most cases of constipation are treated by eating a diet high in fibre, drinking more fluids, and exercising daily.

- **Constipation and children**
  A healthy diet, plenty of fluids, exercise and regular toilet habits can help relieve constipation in children.

- **Diarrhoea**
  Acute diarrhoea in babies and young children can be life threatening.

- **Diverticulosis and diverticulitis**
  Diverticulosis and diverticulitis relate to the formation or infection of abnormal pouches in the bowel wall.

- **Flatulence**
  Foods that tend to trigger flatulence also contain essential nutrients and shouldn’t be eliminated.

- **Incontinence and continence problems**
  Many things can be done to manage, treat and sometimes cure incontinence and continence problems.

- **Incontinence - prevention tips**
  Incontinence can be prevented in most cases.

- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)**
  Irritable bowel syndrome can’t be cured with medications or special diets but avoiding individual triggers can help prevent it.

- **Pinworms**
  Despite the unsavoury reputation, a pinworm infection (worms) is relatively harmless and easily treated.

- **Polyps**
  Nasal polyps can sometimes interfere with breathing.

- **Short bowel syndrome**
  A person with short bowel syndrome is likely to be deficient in a range of important nutrients.

- **Slow transit constipation**
  A newborn with slow transit constipation may not pass meconium until 24 hours or more after being born.

- **Stoma after ileostomy or colostomy**
  A stoma is an artificially created hole (stoma) in the abdomen so that faeces can still leave the body.

- **Tapeworms and hydatid disease**
  It’s important for your own health to control tapeworm infection in your dog.

**Rectum**

- **Anal fissure**
  Around half of cases of anal fissures heal by themselves with proper self-care and avoidance of constipation.

- **Haemorrhoids**
  A diet high in fibre can both treat and prevent haemorrhoids.

- **Rectal cancer**
  If treated in its earliest stages, rectal cancer is highly curable.

- **Rectal prolapse**
  Rectal prolapse occurs when the rectum turns itself inside out and comes out through the anus.

- **Rectocele**
  A rectocele is when the rectum protrudes into the vagina.

**Liver and gallbladder**
Cirrhosis of the liver
Cirrhosis is a type of liver damage where healthy cells are replaced by scar tissue.

Gallbladder - gallstones and surgery
Medical treatment for gallstones may not be necessary unless the gallstones cause symptoms.

Gilbert's syndrome
Gilbert's syndrome and hepatitis both cause jaundice but are not related.

Hepatitis
Hepatitis is an umbrella term for several diseases that affect the liver.

Hepatitis A
Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis A infection and it is recommended for people in high-risk groups.

Hepatitis B
Hepatitis B is a viral infection that affects the liver and can lead to serious illness or death.

Hepatitis B – immunisation
Immunisation against hepatitis B reduces the risk of infection in babies.

Hepatitis C
In Australia, hepatitis C is most often spread through the sharing of unsterile drug injecting equipment. New all oral combination treatment has greatly improved health outcomes for people with.

Hepatitis C Cure - what it means for Victorians (video)

Jaundice in babies
If your baby is full-term and healthy, mild jaundice is nothing to worry about and will resolve by itself within a week or so.

Liver
Some forms of liver disease are inherited, while others are caused by lifestyle factors.

Liver cancer
Liver cancer can be a primary cancer that starts in the liver, or a secondary cancer that starts in another part of the body and spreads to the liver.

Liver - fatty liver disease
The damage caused by fatty liver disease can often be halted or reversed through simple lifestyle changes.

New drugs for the treatment of hepatitis C – Frequently Asked Questions for patients
In Australia, hepatitis C is most often spread through the sharing of unsterile drug injecting equipment. New all oral combination treatment has greatly improved health outcomes for people with.

Primary biliary cirrhosis
Primary biliary cirrhosis is an autoimmune condition characterised by inflammation and scarring of the bile ducts within the liver.

Pancreas

Diabetes
Diabetes and the build-up of glucose (sugar) in the blood can cause serious complications if left untreated.

Diabetes type 1
Type 1 diabetes can affect anyone of any age, but is more common in people under 30 years.

Diabetes type 2
Type 2 diabetes may be prevented, but it cannot be cured.

Pancreas
The pancreas helps to digest food, particularly protein.

Pancreatic cancer

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
The causes of pancreatic cancer are unknown, but smokers are at greater risk.

- **Pancreatitis**
  Pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas, which can be either acute or chronic.

**Related Information**

- **Constipation**
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- **Flatulence**
  Foods that tend to trigger flatulence also contain essential nutrients and shouldn't be eliminated.

**Related information on other websites**

- Dietitians Association of Australia
- Gastroenterological Society of Australia
- GastroNet
- IBSclinic
- Irritable Bowel Information and Support Association
- MedlinePlus

**Support Groups**

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