

Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Diet

What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

IBS is the term used to describe a variety of gut symptoms. Symptoms vary from one individual to another and can be worse for some than others. It is a very common condition with around one in five people affected. Typical symptoms are:

- Low abdominal pain which may ease after opening your bowels
- Diarrhoea and/or constipation
- Bloating and wind (flatulence and burping)
- Passing mucus
- Feeling the need to open your bowels even after having just been to the toilet
- A feeling of urgency to open your bowels

It is not normal to pass blood in poo or lose weight unintentionally. So consult your doctor if this happens. It is important to have a diagnosis of IBS confirmed and other conditions such as coeliac disease and inflammatory bowel disease ruled out. Talk to your GP about having a blood test to rule out coeliac disease prior to making any changes to your diet.

Could my symptoms be due to food allergy?



As symptoms usually occur after eating it is not surprising that food is often blamed. True food allergies are rare and are unlikely to cause IBS symptoms. However, they could be caused by food intolerance. There are many tests available commercially claiming that they can diagnose food intolerance e.g. IgG blood test, kinesiology, electrodermal (Vega) testing or hair analysis.

There is no convincing evidence to support any of these tests. The only reliable way to identify the problem foods is by eliminating and reintroducing foods. This should be done under the supervision of a dietitian, so if you feel your symptoms are due to food intolerance, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian.

What steps can I take?

Try to:

Eat three regular meals a day

Try not to skip any meals or eat late at night. Smaller meal sizes may ease symptoms

Limit alcohol intake to no more than two units per day and have at least two alcohol free days a week

Cut down on rich or fatty foods including chip; fast foods; pies; batter; cheese; pizza; creamy sauces; snacks such as crisps, chocolate, cake and biscuits; spreads and cooking oils; and fatty meats such as burgers and sausages

Reduce your intake of manufactured foods and cook from fresh ingredients where possible

Helpful Hints:

Keep a food and symptom diary whilst you are making changes so you can see what has helped

Take time to eat meals - chew your food well

Take regular exercise such as walking, cycling, swimming

Take time to relax - relaxation tapes, yoga, aromatherapy or massage may help

Make one change at a time so that you can see what has helped



Symptoms of IBS vary from one individual to another and can be worse for some than others. It is a very common condition with around one in five people affected.



Make changes according to your symptoms

If symptoms include bloating and wind:

- Limit fruit juice to one small glass per serving
- Limit intake of gas producing foods e.g. beans and pulses, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, and also sugar-free mints/chewing gum
- Lactose can sometimes cause wind and bloating and IBS-type symptoms. Trial using lactose free cows milk, yoghurts, cream and cheeses instead of ordinary versions for two to four weeks. Using these products will help maintain your calcium intake. If it makes no difference, then return to using ordinary milk and dairy products

If symptoms include constipation:

- Ensure a good fluid intake – about eight glasses/ mugs (two litres) a day
- Increase your fibre intake gradually - any sudden increase may make symptoms worse. Choose whole grains and eat more fruit and vegetables. Oats and linseeds are good sources of fibre and will help to soften poo and make it easier to pass
- Try adding one tablespoon per day of brown or golden linseeds (whole or ground) to breakfast cereal, yoghurt, soup or on salad. Have around a small glass/teacup (150ml) of fluid with each tablespoon of linseeds taken
- Avoid eating extra wheat bran

If symptoms include diarrhoea:

- Ensure a good fluid intake – about eight glasses/ mugs (two litres) a day
- Limit fruit juice to one small glass a day
- Limit caffeine intake from tea, coffee and soft drinks to three drinks per day
- Try reducing wholewheat breakfast cereals and breads and choose white versions instead
- Lactose can sometimes cause diarrhoea and IBS-type symptoms. Trial using lactose free cows milk, yoghurts, cream and cheeses instead of ordinary versions for two to four weeks. If it makes no difference then return to using ordinary milk and dairy products
- Avoid sugar-free sweets, mints and gum containing sorbitol, mannitol and xylitol

Probiotics

You may wish to try 'probiotic' supplements, yoghurts or fermented milk drinks. Take them daily for at least four weeks to see if they improve symptoms. If they do not appear to help then you could try an alternative brand.



Further advice

You need to give your bowels time to adjust to any changes. If your symptoms do not improve after four weeks, re-introduce the foods you have excuded and ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian. They may suggest you trial a diet which reduces short-chain fermentable carbohydrates (also known as a low FODMAP diet). Most people will be able to see an NHS dietitian after being referred by a doctor, health visitor or other medical staff. You can also self-refer. Alternatively, if you wish to see a private dietitian, you can search online at www.freelancedietitians.org which is run by the BDA's Freelance Dietitian Group.

Summary

Dietary changes can often help IBS symptoms and sometimes simple changes are all that is needed. Remember to monitor your progress by keeping a food and symptom diary. If you need further help, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian.

Useful Contacts

The IBS Network

0114 272 3253

www.ibsnetwork.org.uk

Core

020 7486 0341

www.corecharity.org.uk

Self Help IBS Group

www.ibsgroup.org

Steps for Stress

www.stepsforstress.org

Food Fact Sheets on topics in this sheet including *Allergy Testing* and *Probiotics* can be downloaded at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts



This Food Factsheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association (BDA) intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian. If you need to see a dietitian, visit your GP for a referral or: www.freelancedietitians.org for a private dietitian. To check your dietitian is registered check www.hpc-uk.org

This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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