



Royal College of Nursing  
Gastroenterology and  
Stoma Care Forum

# Help is at hand

## *Irritable Bowel Syndrome*

This leaflet, written by specialist nurses,  
aims to answer your main questions  
about IBS and provide you helpful tips  
and advice on living with IBS

# What is IBS?



A syndrome is an assortment of different symptoms together, so by definition IBS is a collection of bowel symptoms. In people with IBS, it is thought that the bowel has become particularly sensitive. This means that it overreacts under certain circumstances.

IBS affects at least one in 10 people and is the most common digestive disorder seen by family doctors. Many people will experience some short-term 'IBS-like' symptoms at some time in their lives, but this doesn't mean they have IBS.

IBS is not confined to any one group of people. It affects people of all ages, from all backgrounds and all walks of life.

It's important to remember that IBS is NOT:

- Life threatening
- A sign of any disease
- Bowel cancer – and it will not cause cancer either
- Hereditary – it cannot be passed on
- 'All in the mind'
- Infectious or contagious

## Symptoms of IBS

Symptoms vary from one person to another and each person's own set of symptoms can be different. But to be diagnosed with IBS, you must have two or more of the following

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symptoms for at least a three-month period (even if the symptoms are not continuous during that time):

- ✓ Diarrhoea
- ✓ Constipation
- ✓ A combination of both diarrhoea or constipation
- ✓ Abdominal pains/cramps
- ✓ Bloating
- ✓ Mucus (or slime) in the stool

*Rectal bleeding, weight loss and sudden change in bowel habit should be reported to your doctor as these symptoms may indicate other problems.*

You may also have other symptoms which might include:

- ⊙ Excessive wind/flatulence
- ⊙ A need to hurry to the toilet
- ⊙ Feeling that you haven't emptied your bowels properly
- ⊙ Soiling of your underwear
- ⊙ Heartburn/indigestion
- ⊙ Embarrassingly noisy or gurgling bowel
- ⊙ Tiredness/fatigue
- ⊙ Headache/migraine
- ⊙ Back pain
- ⊙ Needing to pass urine more frequently
- ⊙ Painful periods and/or sexual intercourse for women

# Causes of IBS

There is no one known cause of IBS, but research suggests that the sensitive bowel function can be set off by a number of ‘trigger factors’ – things that can start the symptoms off, or make them worse. These triggers can include:

- Stress and anxiety – exam pressures, problems at work, relationship difficulties
- Significant life events, such as divorce or bereavement
- Diet – Some foods may trigger symptoms such as dairy or wheat products, fatty foods, caffeine, substitute sugars and alcohol. Irregular meals are also a potential trigger
- Bowel infections such as gastroenteritis, travellers’ diarrhoea or food poisoning
- An operation on the abdomen (examples include hysterectomy or removal of appendix)
- The taking of antibiotics over a long period of time. This can affect the bowel’s natural bacteria
- Hormonal changes (in women these may be linked to the menstrual cycle)
- History of abuse/sexual dysfunction
- Smoking

**It is also possible there may be no apparent reason for your IBS.**

## Investigations

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The diagnosis of IBS may be based on symptoms, which is why your doctor will need to ask you a number of questions.

Additionally, certain people – depending on their age, general health and specific symptoms – may need one or more tests. These may include:



- Blood tests
- Abdominal X-ray
- Barium enema (This is a special X-ray where a series of pictures of the large bowel are taken)
- Sigmoidoscopy/colonoscopy (This is a special flexible tube, inserted into the back passage, that clearly views the lining of the large bowel)
- Faeces/stool samples

## Effect on lifestyle

For some people, the effect of IBS on lifestyle is the most frustrating aspect of the illness. A number of people with IBS say that their symptoms can affect work, travel, social life and sex life. Here's what they have said:

““ I would have difficulty getting to work easily because I'd have really bad stomach cramps and urges to go to the toilet.””

““ I get bouts of terrible wind..it's really embarrassing. I feel like I can't go out in case my friends notice.””

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*The good news is that there are a number of steps you can take to help reduce the symptoms of IBS, and allow you to get on with your life.*

# Stress



Stress is the body's normal reaction to certain situations. It can have a positive effect, as it enables us to feel challenged and helps us to

achieve our goals. But if we have too much stress for too long, then it can lead to certain physical symptoms like headaches and indigestion. In some people, it also affects the bowel, which is why reducing stress can help your IBS symptoms.

## Are you stressed?

- ☹️ Do you suffer from disturbed sleep?
- ☹️ Are you always in a hurry?
- ☹️ Do you have a lack of concentration?
- ☹️ Are you short tempered and/or irritable?
- ☹️ Do you feel restless or jumpy?
- ☹️ Do you feel unable to cope?

There are a number of measures you can take to help reduce stress, such as making lists to help you prioritise responsibilities, exercising, taking up a hobby you enjoy and finding a relaxation technique that works for you.

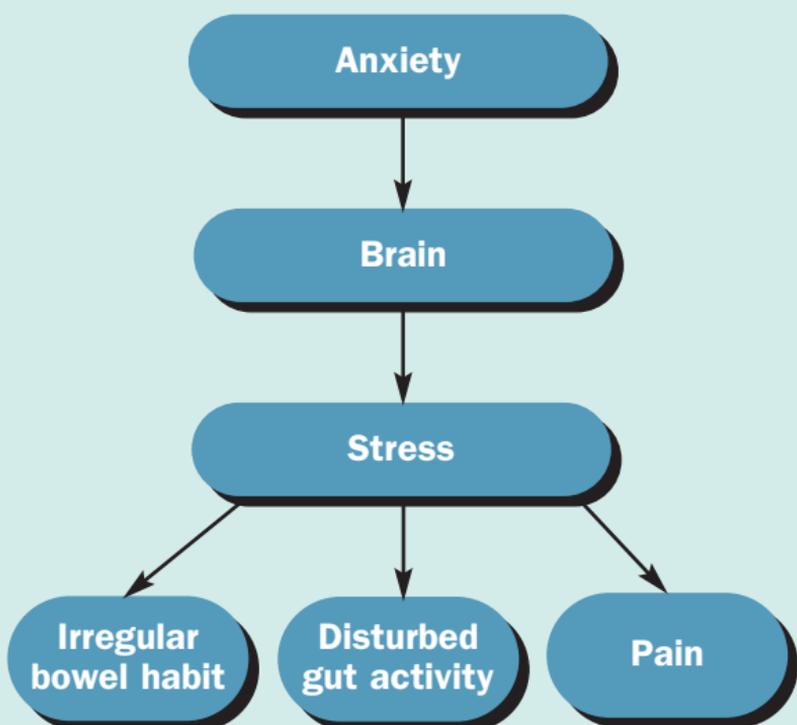
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A few people may benefit from professional help, like counselling.

Complementary therapies may also help, and these include:

- Gut directed hypnotherapy – This has been shown to improve bowel symptoms through deep relaxation.

## How stress can affect your IBS



- Biofeedback relaxation therapy – A special training technique which helps people to relax by using stress signals from your own body.
- Aromatherapy
- Reflexology
- Herbal remedies
- Acupuncture

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*Important: Make sure you use a registered practitioner for any of the above therapies. If you think you might be pregnant remember to let the therapist know before you have treatment.*

# Diet



The right kind of diet can play a key role in reducing the severity of IBS symptoms. Effects of diet differ from one person to another, but it's worth exploring a

number of different aspects within your diet.

- Eat a healthy balanced diet.

Checklist for a balanced diet:

- ✓ Enjoy your food
- ✓ Eat a variety of different foods
- ✓ Eat the right amount to be a healthy weight
- ✓ Eat fruit and vegetables
- ✓ Don't eat too many foods that contain a lot of fat
- ✓ Don't have sugary foods and drinks too often
- ✓ If you drink alcohol, drink sensibly
- ✓ Drink at least 2 litres of fluids daily
- Have regular meals, don't hurry them, and don't forget breakfast!
- Make sure you incorporate the right amount of fibre into your diet.

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- Trial and error is the best way of finding out which foods affect you. If you are restricting your diet you should seek nutritional advice from a dietician. Your family doctor, or a hospital doctor, can refer you.

While fibre can help to relieve constipation, it can also aggravate diarrhoea, so it is best to adjust the amount of fibre in your diet depending on your symptoms.

Vegetarians and vegan diets are high in fibre and may have an even higher number of different starches. This can cause symptoms like pain, diarrhoea, flatulence and bloating.

*Fibre helps bowel movements. Main sources include fresh fruit and vegetables, wholemeal products (bread, rice and pasta) and bran-based cereals.*

## Medicines for IBS



At present there is no standard medication for treating IBS, but there are various types that may relieve symptoms. In some cases your doctor or nurse may recommend

medicines, many of which are available over-the-counter (ask your pharmacist for advice).

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<b>SYMPTOMS</b>	<b>TREATMENT</b>
<b>Diarrhoea</b>	Anti-diarrhoeals
<b>Constipation</b>	Laxatives
<b>Abdominal pain</b>	Bowel relaxants and mild painkillers
<b>Heartburn</b>	Antacids

# So what can I do?

You can make a few lifestyle changes and incorporate them into your daily routine.

- Confirm your diagnosis with your family or hospital doctor
- Think about your diet, make sure you are eating healthily
- Discuss which medications may help
- Consider contacting one of the self-help groups (see address list at the end of this leaflet)

*Discover what works for you.  
The most important thing is to be patient. It may take time, but if you keep trying, you will find your own ways to help you cope best with IBS.*

Find ways to relax:

- 😊 Take time out/find time for yourself
- 😊 Try relaxation tapes and books
- 😊 Have a long hot bath – this may also help you to sleep, so try before bedtime

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Take some gentle and regular exercise, as this will help to regulate the bowels and improve general wellbeing:

- 😊 Walking
- 😊 Swimming
- 😊 Yoga



# Contacts

## ● IBS NETWORK

Northern General Hospital  
Sheffield S5 7AU

*(send a £1 coin and a stamped addressed envelope)*

## ● DIGESTIVE DISORDERS FOUNDATION

PO Box 251

Edgware

Middlesex HA8 6HG

<http://www.digestivedisorders.org.uk>

## ● CONTINENCE FOUNDATION

307 Hatton Square

16 Baldwins Gardens

London EC1N 7RJ

Tel: 020 7831 9831

<http://www.continence.foundation.dial.pipex.com>

## ● THE UK REGISTER OF IBS THERAPISTS

PO Box 57

Warrington WA5 1FG

<http://ibs-register.co.uk>

## ● NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MEDICAL HERBALISTS

50 Longbrook Street

Exeter

Devon EX4 6AH

<http://www.btinternet.com/~nimh/welcome.html>





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