

Family Medicine Clerkship

Title: Irritable Bowel Syndrome

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Plain Language Summary:

What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder that affects your intestines (also called bowels). In people with IBS, the intestinal muscles squeeze too hard or not hard enough causing food to move too quickly or slowly. When this happens, a person can feel abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation. IBS is uncomfortable but it does not cause damage to your intestines, increase your risk of cancer, or shorten your life. Most people find ways to manage their symptoms by changing their lifestyle and diet.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

Unlike having a stomach ache once or twice a year, symptoms of IBS usually happen more often.

Common symptoms include:

- Abdominal pain or cramping that may go away after having a bowel movement
- Bloating and gas
- Diarrhea
- Constipation

People with IBS may notice triggers that worsen their symptoms. Common triggers include particular foods or medications, eating too much, and stress. Women with IBS may notice symptoms during or around their menstrual periods.

Why do people get IBS?

Nobody knows exactly what causes IBS, but it tends to run in families. Sometimes, a prior intestinal infection can increase the risk of getting IBS. Foods do not cause IBS, but can make symptoms worse.

How will my doctor diagnose IBS?

Your doctor may ask you questions about your symptoms and do a physical examination. If your symptoms fit a certain pattern, you may be diagnosed with IBS. There are no lab studies that diagnose IBS. However, your doctor may recommend more tests if you have signs that suggest a different disease or if you are not responding to treatment.

How is IBS treated?

There is no cure for IBS, but there are many ways to control symptoms. Your doctor may suggest:

- **Diet changes:** Avoid foods that make your symptoms worse—common triggers include caffeinated drinks, alcohol, chocolate, dairy products, artificial sweeteners, and fatty foods. It may be helpful to keep a diary of what you eat to find out what foods bother you. Eat smaller meals and drink plenty of liquids. Adding fiber to your diet by taking fiber supplements or by eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain breads and cereals can also be helpful.
- **Lifestyle changes:** Because stress can worsen IBS, learning how to manage stress can be very effective in controlling your symptoms. A good place to start is making sure you get enough sleep and exercise. Your doctor may also recommend relaxation techniques like breathing exercises and yoga or recommend that you talk to a counselor.

- **Medications:** If your symptoms are more severe, your doctor may suggest over-the-counter or prescription medications. Depending on your symptoms, your doctor may recommend anti-diarrhea medications, laxatives for constipation, muscle relaxants for painful bowel spasms, or antidepressant medications, which help by relieving depression and by slowing down the neurons that control your intestines. Your doctor may also suggest probiotics or “good” bacteria that normally live in your intestines. People with IBS may not have enough good bacteria. Some studies have shown that adding probiotics found in yogurt and as dietary supplements may improve symptoms of IBS.

Where can I find more information?

Mayo Clinic <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/irritable-bowel-syndrome/DS00106>
Kids Health <http://kidshealth.org/parent/general/aches/ibs.html>
Medline Plus <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/irritablebowelsyndrome.html>

Key Words:

Abdominal pain
Diarrhea
Constipation
Stress
Irritable bowel syndrome

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