

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

IBS is a disorder in how your bowel works. While the function is abnormal, no structural abnormalities exist. It's annoying, painful and sometimes embarrassing, but not life threatening and certainly not uncommon. IBS affects up to 15% of people; less than half of these people seek help. Symptoms include abdominal pain, change in bowel habits (constipation, diarrhea, or both), cramping, fullness, bloating, urgency, abnormal stool consistency, passage of mucous, or a sense of incomplete evacuation.

Causes

The true cause of IBS is unknown. The symptoms of IBS seem to occur as a result of abnormal functioning or communication between the nervous system and the muscles in the bowel. This abnormal regulation may cause the bowel to be "irritated" or more sensitive. The muscles of the bowel wall may contract too forcefully or too weakly, too slowly, or too rapidly. Although there is no blockage, these contractions may cause cramping and the sense of functional blockage.

Stress does not cause IBS, but emotional stress can contribute to and worsen IBS symptoms. While one may not be able to control the effects of stress on the intestine, reducing sources of stress may improve one's symptoms.

Treatment

If you have symptoms of IBS, see your physician. Only your doctor can say for sure if your problem is IBS and not cancer, gallbladder disease, an ulcer or another digestive system condition with similar symptoms. You often need treatment for years, as IBS waxes and wanes.

First, know that IBS is not a serious or life-threatening condition; it does not cause cancer. More good news: Simple measures often relieve symptoms.

Stress reduction, use of behavioral therapy, biofeedback, relaxation, or pain management techniques can help relieve the symptoms of IBS in some individuals. Use of a diary may help identify certain foods or other factors that cause your symptoms.

Mild to moderate symptoms can often be managed by dietary changes. Your physician may recommend avoiding meals that are too large or high in fatty or fried foods. Caffeine or alcohol may also cause cramps or diarrhea.

Some types of sugar, such as sorbitol commonly used as a low-calorie sweetener and fructose, found naturally in honey and some fruits may be poorly absorbed by the gut and cause cramping and diarrhea. Gas producing foods such as beans, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, brussel sprouts, and onions may cause bloating and increased discomfort in people with IBS. Antidepressants in low doses have been shown to be helpful in some with IBS.

Increasing dietary fiber may help to improve IBS symptoms. Soluble fiber such as that found in citrus fruits, flaxseeds, and legumes may help soften stool and lessen the severity of cramps. Insoluble fiber such as cellulose, cereals, and bran can absorb water as it moves through the digestive tract and lessen diarrhea. In some people too much fiber can cause discomfort. Adding fiber to the diet gradually with adequate amounts of liquids may eliminate the discomfort.

Individuals with moderate to severe IBS may benefit from prescribed medication. Medications can help to control the symptoms of IBS but they do not cure the condition. Medications act directly on the intestinal muscles to help contractions return to normal. Antidepressants in low doses have been shown to be helpful in some with IBS.

Relief of IBS symptoms is often a slow process. It may take six months or more for definite improvements to be appreciated. Patience is extremely important in dealing with this problem. The tendency for the intestine to respond to stress will always be present. With attention to proper diet and in some cases, use of appropriate medications, the symptoms of IBS can be greatly improved or eliminated.

For example, pay attention to eating habits that seem to irritate your IBS, and change your ways if necessary. It may help to eat on a more regular schedule. Don't overeat and don't eat on the run. Slow down. Enjoy your food. Urgency and overeating can aggravate bowel irregularity. In addition to these measures, your doctor and registered dietician may recommend suggestions to help the symptoms of IBS.

More information is also available at www.irritablebowelsyndrome.org