

Health & Fitness Tips

Irritable Bowel Syndrome - Blase about your bowel?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a painful disturbance in the bowel's normal rhythmic movement. SQNLDR Kay Hatton looks at the many ways IBS may affect you.

IT'S a common disorder – around one in five Australians experience symptoms of IBS at some time in their lives, but some suffer much more than others.

IBS is more common in women than men, its symptoms usually presenting in the late teens and early twenties. It is unusual for symptoms to present for the first time in someone over 40.

What causes IBS?

The cause of IBS remains unknown. Some factors such as diet, infection, food intolerance and stress have been identified as being likely to trigger an attack in susceptible people.

Findings suggest that people with IBS have overly-sensitive bowels, therefore mild stimulation which would not aggravate a normal bowel, can cause pain and discomfort in sufferers. There is growing evidence to support the theory that chronic diarrhoea and chronic constipation are the result of bacterial infection, and that IBS may be related to this chronic infection.

Functional disorder

This term may sometimes used to describe your IBS, because when your bowel is examined there is no sign of disease, despite the obvious change in your bowel function. For this reason, diagnosis of IBS is usually made based on the presentation of your symptoms and the absence of other disease processes.

Symptoms

If you have IBS, you may experience some of the common symptoms which can include constipation, diarrhoea, abdominal pain or cramping, bloating and excessive gas, mucous in the stool and nausea. None of these symptoms are exclusive to IBS, so it is important for you to see you doctor to exclude conditions such as coeliac disease, lactose intolerance, bowel infection or other bowel disease.

There are three main types of IBS:

- Constipation predominant
- Diarrhoea predominant
- Alternating constipation and diarrhoea.

Symptoms not associated with IBS include blood in your bowel motions, weight loss, fever, severe diarrhoea at night and symptoms which first present after 40 years of age.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is no cure for IBS. The aim of current treatment is to manage or control your symptoms. The first step is to identify individual triggers and avoid these where ever possible. One way to help identify triggers is to keep a diary of events surrounding each episode (including food and fluid intake, activities, workload and any personal issues). Treatment options can then be tailored to suit individual needs, and may include:

- A modest increase in dietary fibre and plenty of clear fluids (increase in fibre should be gradual to give the bowel time to adjust).
- Avoiding foods and other substances that clearly trigger symptoms.
- Taking medication or beginning treatments to assist with constipation and/or diarrhoea.
- Using pain relief under guidance.
- Using antispasmodic medication.
- Beginning stress management if stress is a trigger.
- Trying to establish a healthy balanced diet and avoiding sudden changes to routine.



Prophylaxis: Dietary fibre may help your IBS. Photo: CPL Andrew Hetherington

- Exercising regularly.

The symptoms of IBS are disruptive, but they aren't a sign of and they don't lead to underlying illness.

It's important to see your doctor if you experience a change in your normal bowel habits, to exclude other more serious causes. Your doctor can then work out an individual treatment plan to suit your particular needs.