

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome is a common disorder of the digestive tract that can persist for many years. People with this condition have a problem with how the intestines work to push food through. At times, food seems to move too quickly or too slowly and the person may experience reoccurring bouts of diarrhea and/or constipation. Other symptoms include crampy abdominal pain, bloating or gas; mucus in the stool; a feeling that a bowel movement hasn't been completed; or an increase in symptoms after eating or when under stress.

Since there is no test to diagnose irritable bowel syndrome, it can only be diagnosed by observing the symptoms and trying to determine what causes them. Therefore, it's a good idea to try to systematically record your symptoms. One good way is to write them down when they occur. Each time you have a problem, make notes on a three by five inch card. Write down what you can remember about what you ate and drank before the episode, what your mood was like, what medications you took, what emotional stress you experienced, or other such factors. After you have diligently recorded several episodes, you can then review the cards and look for a pattern that might identify the triggers that cause your irritable bowel syndrome. This is important because—for all practical purposes—treatment is limited to self-management.

Home treatment for irritable bowel syndrome depends on whether the main problem is constipation or diarrhea.

If you're constipated, try adding fiber-rich foods to your diet, such as fruits and vegetables; whole-grain and whole-wheat breads, pastas, and cereals; and cooked dried beans, peas, and lentils. You might also try an over-the-counter fiber supplement, such as Metamucil, Fiberall, or Citrucel. Only take laxatives if your medical professional recommends it.

If you have diarrhea, try eliminating foods that make diarrhea worse, such as alcohol, caffeine, beans, broccoli, apples, spicy foods, citrus fruit, butter, and bacon. Also, avoid dairy products that contain lactose, such as milk. Yogurt is a good substitute. Add more starches to your diet, such as bread, rice, potatoes, and pasta. Foods high in fiber can be helpful. You might also try taking an over-the-counter medication for diarrhea, such as Imodium. But check with your medical professional if you find you're using it more than once every week.

Regardless of whether you are bothered by constipation or diarrhea, try to reduce stress in your life by finding ways to deal with the situations or circumstances that are particularly stressful. Also, make sure your lifestyle includes a regular exercise program. Exercise will help you cope with the stress that can't be avoided. Finally, if you smoke, quit. Nicotine can contribute to diarrhea.

Call your medical professional if any of the following five situations is true for you:

1. if you've tried home treatment for a month and don't see any improvement
2. if abdominal pain is accompanied by a fever of 100.5 degrees or higher, or you have chills, or yellowing of the eyes and skin
3. if your pain is severe, or if symptoms become worse

4. if your symptoms change significantly from their usual pattern
5. if you have blood in your stool not related to hemorrhoids

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- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.

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