

Irritable Bowel Syndrome



What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common digestive problem that causes episodes of abdominal pain, cramping or bloating, and diarrhea or constipation. The cause is not well understood, but symptoms often get worse with stress or after eating. Intestines show no physical signs of the disease and there are no specific tests that can diagnose the condition. Nevertheless, IBS is one of the most common disorders of the digestive tract.

Symptoms of IBS include:

- abdominal bloating, pain, and gas
- mucus in the stool
- feeling as if a bowel movement hasn't been completed, or
- irregular bowel habits, with constipation, diarrhea, or both.

While the cause of IBS is unknown, symptoms are thought to be related to abnormal muscle contractions in the intestines. However, when tests are done, no changes (such as inflammation or tumors) are found in the physical structure of the intestines.

IBS can persist for many years. An episode may be more severe than the one before it, but the disorder itself does not worsen over time or lead to more serious diseases, such as cancer. Symptoms, in fact, tend to get better over time.

If you have not yet been diagnosed with IBS, try to rule out other causes of stomach problems, such as eating a new food, nervousness, or stomach flu. Try the home treatment recommended here for one to two weeks. If you feel no improve-

ment, or if your symptoms worsen, be sure to call your physician for an appointment.

Your physician may prescribe medication for you to take in addition to the recommended home treatment. Tests your physician will recommend to determine the cause of your symptoms will depend on your age, how your symptoms come on, how severe they are, and your response to any initial treatment.

Prevention

- There is no way to prevent IBS. However, symptoms often worsen or improve because of changes in your diet, your stress level, medications, the amount of exercise you are getting, and for other reasons that may or may not be known.
- Because everyone reacts differently to different foods and situations, keeping a food diary or symptom journal may help you to identify which foods and situations can trigger your symptoms. This may help you avoid or minimize attacks.

Home treatment

If constipation is your main symptom:

- Try to eat more fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Add these fiber-rich foods to your diet slowly, so they do not worsen gas or cramps. To learn more about fiber, check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Gradually add unprocessed wheat bran to your diet. Start by using 1 tablespoon per day, and gradually increase



to 4 tablespoons per day. Try sprinkling bran on cereal, soup, and casseroles. Be sure to drink extra water to avoid becoming bloated.

- As an alternative to bran, you can try a product (such as Citrucel, FiberCon, or Metamucil) that contains a bulk-forming agent. Start with 1 tablespoon or less and gradually increase. Again, drink extra water to avoid bloating.
- Use laxatives only if your physician recommends them.

If diarrhea is your main symptom:

- Using the fiber-rich food and wheat bran suggestions mentioned above for relieving constipation can sometimes help relieve diarrhea by absorbing liquid in the large intestine.
- Avoid foods that can make your diarrhea worse. Try eliminating one food at a time, then add it back gradually. If a food doesn't seem to be related to symptoms, there is no need to avoid it. Many people find that the following can make their diarrhea worse:
 - alcohol, caffeine, nicotine
 - beans, broccoli, cabbage, apples
 - spicy foods
 - foods high in acid, such as citrus fruit
 - fatty foods, including bacon, sausage, butter, oils, and anything deep-fried.
- Avoid dairy products that contain lactose (milk sugar) if they seem to make your symptoms worse. However, be sure to get calcium in your diet from

other sources. Your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook* has additional information about calcium and lactose intolerance.

- Avoid sorbitol (an artificial sweetener found in some sugarless candies and gum) and olestra (a fat substitute used in some processed foods, such as potato chips).
- Avoid foods that don't digest well, such as corn, carrots, and peas.
- Add more starchy food (bread, rice, potatoes, pasta) to your diet.

If diarrhea persists, a nonprescription medication such as loperamide (the active ingredient in products such as Imodium) may help. Check with your physician if you are using loperamide twice a month or more.

Suggestions for managing your stress

- Try to keep a record of the life events that occur with your symptoms. This may help you see any connection between your symptoms and stressful occasions.
- Use regular, vigorous exercise such as swimming, jogging, or brisk walking to help reduce tension. Yoga and meditation may also help relieve symptoms.
- For more ways to manage stress, check your *Healthwise Handbook* or kp.org/healthyliving for Kaiser Permanente classes and personalized online stress reduction programs.

When to call Kaiser Permanente



Call your doctor if you experience any of the following:

- You have been diagnosed with IBS and your symptoms get worse, begin to disrupt your usual activities, or do not respond as usual to home treatment.
- You are becoming increasingly fatigued.
- Your symptoms frequently wake you.
- Your pain gets worse with movement.
- You have abdominal pain and a fever.
- You are losing weight and you don't know why.
- Your appetite has decreased.
- You have abdominal pain that does not get better when you pass gas or stools.
- There is blood in your stools that is not related to previously diagnosed hemorrhoids.

For additional health information:

Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org. Here you'll find the Health Encyclopedia, which offers more in-depth information on this and many other topics, or contact your facility's Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources. For medical advice, please consult your physician or other medical professional.

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 health care 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. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.