

Tackling irritable bowel syndrome

The Health Column

1404
2014

16 April 2014

Irritable bowel syndrome is one of those conditions which in the past seemed to be used to explain any problems of the gut that couldn't be easily explained.

But the condition, usually known as IBS, is very real and affects the colon or large bowel, often very painfully.

It is estimated that about one in five Australians experiences the unpleasant symptoms of IBS at some time in their life. To this day the exact causes of Irritable Bowel Syndrome are unknown. IBS, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and spastic colon are responsible for over 50% of all consultations with specialist gastroenterologists.

The good news is that IBS sufferers usually have no physical abnormalities in the bowel. However IBS symptoms like abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, bowel pain and diarrhoea can be very severe causing sufferers a lot of discomfort, stress and tension.

As a result, IBS sufferers are often desperate for a solution which relieves them of their constant pain and discomfort. Speaking to your doctor and pharmacist about your treatment and associated health issues is a good start to finding relief.

IBS refers to a disorder that involves abdominal pain and bloating, as well as changes in bowel movements. Some people suffer constipation, some have diarrhoea and some alternate between the two.

Certain factors can 'trigger' attacks in susceptible individuals. These include:

- Infection – An episode of gastroenteritis may result in persistent bowel symptoms. The cause is unknown, but may involve changes to nerve function in the bowel or changes in the normal bacterial population of the bowel.
- Food intolerance – Impaired absorption of lactose (a sugar found in dairy and many processed foods), fructose or sorbitol (an artificial sweetener) may trigger IBS.
- General diet – Low fibre diets can exacerbate constipation in some with IBS.
- Stress – Emotions, such as anxiety or stress, can affect the nerves of the bowel in susceptible people.
- Medications – Certain medications (such as antibiotics, antacids and painkillers) can lead to constipation.



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Thankfully, most people who suffer from IBS can to some extent control their symptoms with diet, stress management and prescribed medications.

The first step is to see your doctor and decide on a course of treatment plan for your specific needs.

Different treatments work for different types of IBS. Avoiding individual triggers can help many people with IBS, while others choose to take medications at times when their IBS is 'playing up'.

According to the The Gastroenterological Society of Australia (www.gesa.org.au) some of the most common medications used for IBS include:

- Anti-diarrhoeal agents (e.g. Imodium, Lomotil, fibre supplements) can be an essential part of management in those with diarrhoea-predominant IBS.
- Pain-relieving medications (e.g. opiates such as codeine) can provide effective pain relief. One of their most common side effects, constipation, may also relieve the diarrhoea of diarrhoea-predominant IBS. Pain relief may also be obtained from medications that reduce bowel spasms.
- Constipation treatments (e.g. fibre supplements or laxatives) may provide relief for constipation-predominant IBS.
- Antispasmodic agents (e.g. mebeverine, belladonna, hyoscine and peppermint oil capsules) may ease cramping.
- Tricyclic antidepressants can be effective in treating the pain of IBS, but are best prescribed for a trial period with monitoring of symptoms. Use of these medications does not mean that IBS is caused by depression.

But outside of medicines, diet is critical in IBS and every day we should all aim to eat:

- Brown or wholemeal breads, high-fibre cereals, rice, pasta, legumes: 4 or more serves
- Dairy products: 3 serves
- Fruit: 2 or 3 pieces
- Vegetables: 5 serves
- Meat, cheese, poultry and fish: 1 or 2 serves and drink 8 glasses of water, teas or juices

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination and your Self Care pharmacist can give you more information about IBS issues with a special *Irritable bowel syndrome* fact card available. For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or check the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder.