



## What is irritable bowel syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common digestive problem affecting 10-20 percent of the population. It can cause episodes of abdominal pain, cramping, or bloating, and diarrhea or constipation.

## How is irritable bowel syndrome diagnosed?

Unfortunately, there is no single test that can diagnose IBS. If you are experiencing the common symptoms, your doctor will take a detailed history during an office visit. You will be asked a series of questions. Your doctor may also perform a physical exam to help make the diagnosis. If your doctor recommends an exam, it is possible that no changes (such as inflammation or tumors) will be found in the physical structure of the intestines. This is because IBS is a disorder with symptoms even though there are no physical changes in the intestine.

If you have not yet been diagnosed with IBS, try to rule out other causes of stomach problems, such as food intolerances, nervousness, or stomach flu. Try the home treatment recommended here for one to two weeks. If you feel no improvement, 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. Your physician may recommend tests to determine the cause of your symptoms, depending on:

- your age
- how your symptoms occur
- how severe they are
- your response to any initial treatment

## What are the symptoms of IBS?

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.

Symptoms may increase with stress, certain medications, lack of physical activity, and some foods (dairy and spicy). IBS can last 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.

## What is the cause of IBS?

While the cause of IBS is not well understood, it may be related to abnormal muscle contractions in the intestines. IBS may be related to a person's family background, since hereditary factors play a role. IBS is also associated with chronic disorders such as migraine headaches and fibromyalgia (fatigue and pain throughout the body). Patients with chronic stress are also at high risk for having IBS.

## How can I prevent IBS symptoms?

Tracking your symptoms can help identify patterns or triggers that you should avoid. For each IBS episode, take a moment to write down:

- when your symptoms occurred
- what you ate or drank before the episode
- when you last had a bowel movement
- your mood
- any medications you took
- any emotional stress you experienced

As you record each episode, review your notes and look for patterns that might identify triggers. Try to avoid any suspected triggers in the future.

## Is there a cure for IBS?

Unfortunately, there is no single cure for IBS. Don't let this discourage you, though, as many home treatment strategies are effective at reducing symptoms, pain, and discomfort.

## 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 your gas or cramps.
- Gradually add unprocessed oat 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 take a fiber supplement. The most effective contain psyllium (Metamucil). Methylcellulose (Citrucel) is a reasonable alternative. Start with 1 tablespoon or less of the supplement, 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 oat bran suggestions mentioned above for relieving constipation can sometimes help relieve diarrhea by absorbing liquid in the large intestine.
- Use your diary to help you identify foods that might be making your diarrhea worse. Try eliminating one food at a time, and adding 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.
- 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 life events that occur with your symptoms. This may help you see any connection between your symptoms and stressful situations.
- Use regular, vigorous exercise such as swimming, jogging, or brisk walking to help reduce tension. Yoga and meditation may also help relieve symptoms.
- Try to get 7-9 hours of sleep each night. Lack of sleep leads to fatigue and lower stress tolerance, both of which can worsen IBS symptoms.
- For more ways to manage stress, visit [kp.org/healthyliving](http://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 wake you in the middle of the night.
- 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.

### Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- Your ability to manage stress can be seriously affected by violence or abuse. If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, there is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to [ndvh.org](http://ndvh.org)

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 the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.