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Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome is a disease/condition characterized by abdominal bloating, pain and changed bowel movements. Irritable bowel syndrome may have a serious impact on quality of life.

How widespread is irritable bowel syndrome?

Approximately 18% of the Danish population is estimated to suffer from irritable bowel syndrome. Around half of all Danes experience at least one period of irritable bowel syndrome symptoms during their lifetime. The disease can manifest itself at any age, but most commonly starts in early adulthood. It is three times more common in women than in men.

What causes irritable bowel syndrome?

Scientific evidence suggests that an imbalance in the intestinal flora is an important factor. The term 'Intestinal flora' covers the billions of bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites that live in our intestines. Irritable bowel syndrome often develops following severe gastrointestinal infections or following the use of broad-spectrum antibiotics.

Stress may be a contributing factor to the development of irritable bowel syndrome.

What are the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome?

Pain or abdominal cramps that come and go, often daily and often following meals. Pain is rarely experienced at night.

Bowel movements tend to vary between lumpy, normal and loose from one to many times per day. Some people have no bowel movements for several days. A typical symptom is the feeling of not being properly emptied after using the toilet. Sometimes, a blob of mucus follows a bowel movement.

Stomach bloating, particularly after meals, is often the biggest source of discomfort. Air results in uncomfortable abdominal tension and general malaise. The air may push up against the diaphragm, causing a sensation of breathlessness. The

air may result in extensive belching and flatulence. There may also be abdominal noise and rumbling. The discomfort eases following bowel movement.

Irritable bowel syndrome is often accompanied by symptoms from the upper gastrointestinal tract in the form of nausea, indigestion, heartburn, difficulty swallowing and the feeling of having a lump in the throat. Other symptoms may include fatigue, sensation of fever or joint pain.

The progress of the disease is often variable and the severity of the symptoms may change from fairly mild for brief periods to severe daily pain that is so debilitating that the individual is unable to work.

Examination is important

Examination of the colon by colonoscopy (endoscopy) is important since the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome can be confused with other symptoms of more serious diseases such as inflammatory diseases (Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis), polyps or cancer. If these diseases are not detected as early as possible, the prospect of successful treatment will often deteriorate.

A stool sample is often sufficient in young people.

Treatment of irritable bowel syndrome

Treatment primarily consists of lifestyle adjustments but the effect of this is often not sufficient.

Lifestyle adjustments:

Diet

A versatile, high fiber and natural diet and regular meals are thought to be most important. Some people benefit from psyllium husk (HUSK, Syfilliflor), which provides a layer of plant mucilage around the stool, thereby facilitating intestinal transit. HUSK helps to create formed but soft stools. It can help with both loose and hard bowel movements.

However, some individuals experience exacerbated pain when they have a high fiber intake.

Large amounts of sugar, white bread and artificial sweeteners are discouraged. Some individuals are very sensitive to gluten and feel better by avoiding gluten in their diet. Some individuals experience secondary lactose intolerance and feel better when avoiding milk and similar.

Fluids

Drink plenty of fluids. Ideally water. Drink 2-2½ liters per day. Additional fluids are necessary when exercising or if there is a heatwave. Coffee and tea are OK in smaller quantities.

Toilet habits

Adequate time and peace and quiet are important. It may be a good idea to set aside time in the morning in order to manage to go to the toilet before the start of a hectic working day. It is also important to pay attention to your bowels and use the toilet when the need arises.

Placing a support under your feet when sitting on the toilet can make it easier to empty the bowel as the rectum is straightened out.

Exercise

Exercise has general health benefits and can reduce tension in the body. Air is also more likely to escape from the intestines during exercise. Daily exercise is therefore recommended.

Sleep and stress

In order for the intestines to work properly, they must have rest. A number of essential processes take place in the body, including the intestines, during night-time sleep. The intestinal function is often inhibited by the mind and body being on high alert.

Laxatives

Mild laxatives as Magnesia and Movicol can alleviate the accumulation of feces and the tension in the intestine and therefore also the pain.

Lactic acid bacteria

Since the disease is thought to be caused by an imbalance in the intestinal flora, an option could be to test the effect of high-dose lactic acid bacteria.

Effect

The symptoms of irritable bowel disease are often significantly reduced using these measures. Nevertheless, it may take up to six months before the full effects are felt. As such, the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome requires patience.

For your own notes

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