

Causes of IBS

Irritable bowel syndrome

Causes of IBS- irritable bowel syndrome

We do not think that IBS has a single cause. There is a wide variety of reasons why patients develop the condition. However, the single most common trigger to the start of symptoms is following a bout of food poisoning or gastroenteritis.

There does not seem to be a genetic cause and there appears to be many factors that can provoke symptoms. Some people find that stress makes their symptoms worse. In some people, eating irregularly or eating an abnormal diet may be responsible.

Some drugs, particularly when taken long term for chronic conditions, can cause IBS type symptoms such as diarrhoea. Overall, there seems to be some interaction between the nervous system in the gut and brain, emotional state, the gut microbes and the immune system of the gut.

There are many different methods of treating IBS. All will have an effect on some people, but none will help in every person with IBS.

Many people with mild IBS symptoms don't need any treatment. No treatment is likely to take away symptoms completely; however, treatment can often ease symptoms and improve your bowel habits and quality of life.

What treatment is available for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

Dietary management

If a dietary cause is suspected your doctor can give advice on simple first line dietary changes to try or may refer you to a dietitian. The dietitian will try to identify any foods that cause your IBS symptoms (trigger food). This may involve leaving out particular sorts of foods from the diet, to see whether these symptoms improve. The dietitian may suggest an 'exclusion diet', which will exclude a number of common 'trigger' foods from your diet.

A particular form of this is the low FODMAP diet. If symptoms improve, individual items can then be added back into the diet until the specific trigger food or foods are identified. If you have a diagnosis of an eating disorder, or you have had one in the past, exclusion diets may not be the best treatment option for you. There are other non diet treatments than can be tried, instead.

If constipation is a symptom, then bulking agents such as natural oat or rice bran, bran containing cereals such as oats, wholegrain rice or isphagula husk (a natural laxative) are helpful. But some laxatives containing fibre or senna, whilst helping with constipation, may make pain a little worse in some people.

Avoid adding additional wheat bran in your diet as this can make symptoms worse.

Drug therapy

Drugs to reduce bowel spasm have been used for many years.

They are generally very safe and often worth trying. Most are available without a prescription and the pharmacist can advise. Unfortunately, they only benefit a relatively small number of patients.

Laxatives can be prescribed for constipation by your doctor whilst some patients benefit from treatment with peppermint oil or other over-the-counter medicines.

Some patients find probiotics very helpful, but there is no specific prescribed preparation. It is rather a question of trial and error. Sometimes when pain is a major problem, small doses of drugs, which are used as antidepressants, such as amitriptyline, can be helpful. These can be useful in patients who have no signs of depression.

There are also new classes of drugs that may be used if simpler treatments do not succeed.

Alternative IBS treatments

Psychological therapies

Any stressful situation (for example, family problems, work stress, examinations) may trigger symptoms of IBS in some people. Examples of psychological therapies are cognitive behavioural

therapy (CBT) and psychotherapy. Psychological therapies can be very effective for some people with IBS.

Relaxation therapy

These have been shown to be effective for some people but it is unclear whether they improve bowel symptoms.

How can you self-manage your irritable bowel syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a condition where good self-management can make a huge

Identifying trigger foods

This may be done with a dietitian. Keeping a food diary together with a record of bowel symptoms. This may show which foods cause the most problems or whether there is some other pattern.

Foods which commonly cause abdominal upset include wheat products, dairy products, onions, nuts and caffeine-containing drinks such as coffee, tea and cola.

Some patients cannot digest lactose (the sugar in milk) and so develop wind and diarrhoea after taking large amounts of milk or dairy products, which can include cream, cheese, yoghurt and chocolate.

Heathy eating habits

Following healthy eating habits, avoiding trigger foods and eating regularly can bring about a significant improvement in symptoms.

What is the outlook for IBS (prognosis)

IBS usually causes symptoms long-term and often stays with you for the rest of your life. However, the symptoms tend to come and go. You may have long spells without any symptoms, or may have only mild symptoms.

Treatment can often help to ease symptoms when they flare up. IBS often improves with time and, in some cases, symptoms clear up for good at some stage.

Egne notater

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Egne notater



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