

## Understanding Irritable Bowel Syndrome

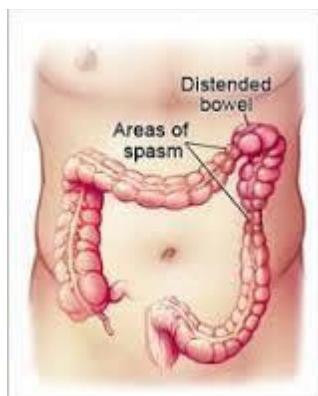
At least one in six New Zealanders periodically have an attack of Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Because people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome often suffer in silence without taking their complaint to a doctor the number with this disorder is unrecognised.

### What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome is often called "spastic colon". It is probably the result of abnormal muscular activity of the intestinal wall. Irritable Bowel Syndrome often begins in adolescence or in young adulthood.

### Who is affected?

The condition commonly starts between 15 and 40 years of age and is more common in women. However, it may affect any age.



### What causes Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

The cause of Irritable Bowel Syndrome is, in many cases, obscure. However, there is often an association between flare-ups of the Irritable Bowel Syndrome and one or several of the following:

- Stress, anxiety, worry, grief, depression
- Excessive intake of tea, coffee, alcohol
- Excessive fatigue

Certain medications can occasionally cause over or under activity of the bowel. You should check with your family doctor or specialist concerning your current medication. Occasionally milk products can be the cause of diarrhoea which can mimic Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Certain foods can also trigger an attack. Previous bowel infections have occurred in up to one quarter of patients.

### How do you know if you have Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Abdominal pain and change in bowel habits are the main symptoms. The pain can occur anywhere in the abdomen and it can be severe. Indigestion, heartburn and nausea may also occur.

Typically, the symptoms are temporarily relieved by a bowel movement. Persons with Irritable Bowel Syndrome frequently complain of feeling bloated and passing an excessive amount of gas which also relieves the discomfort. Constipation is also a frequent complaint. The bowel movement may be infrequent, hard, pellet or ribbon-like. Often those with Irritable Bowel Syndrome abuse laxatives because of chronic constipation. Diarrhoea may also occur but is a less frequent symptom.

### What other symptoms may occur?

Irregular bowel movements, varying diarrhoea and constipation

Urgency – a need to rush to open the bowels

Incontinence – sometimes an accident will occur if a toilet is not nearby. Although this is unpleasant, don't let your life be ruled by the possibility. Remember, it happens to a lot of people. Don't be embarrassed to mention this to your doctor.

A feeling of incomplete emptying of the bowels after having them open

Tenderness in the abdomen

Proctalgia fugax – a brief, sharp pain felt low down inside the rectum (back passage)

Nausea, belching, and occasionally vomiting

### Are other organs affected?

A few patients with Irritable Bowel Syndrome may also have an irritable bladder causing frequency of passing urine. Certain patients may, rarely, develop pains over the front of the chest, discomfort in the loins, or overbreathing attacks.

### Minimising your symptoms

Irritable Bowel Syndrome is a chronic condition that may occur on and off throughout your life but there are things you can do to minimise the symptoms.

### Investigations

The symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome may mimic the symptoms of a serious disease. It is important that you undergo a complete physical examination, particularly if the symptoms appeared only recently to be sure your problem is not being caused by anything more serious.

**Blood tests** - Looking for anaemia or malabsorption

**Stool tests** – To exclude an infective cause if diarrhoea is present or to check for blood loss from the bowel.

**Colonoscopy** – Examination of the bowel is important to exclude any other bowel problems.

Occasionally further tests such as **X-rays, ultrasound tests or examination of the small bowel** are also necessary.

### What treatment is available?

Knowing that your symptoms are not due to a dangerous disease may ease your mind and possibly decrease the stress that may make your Irritable Bowel Syndrome worse.

A dietary diary is helpful to identify foods which may bring on attacks of the Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Using a simple note pad identifying all foods and drinks consumed during the 36 hours prior to an attack is recommended.

Sometimes a high fibre diet including consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables and fibre supplements is helpful. In some people however, it can increase bloating and gas.

Do not eliminate a food just because it appears to cause symptoms on a single occasion. Be sure that the food produces symptoms consistently before giving it up. Many people restrict their diet to just a few selections and feel worse for it. They often feel better when they return to a more varied diet. Some foods will seem to cause distress when consumed in large amounts but do not when taken in small helpings or as part of a meal.

Bulk-formers which contain natural vegetable fibre psyllium are available without a prescription and may help relieve your constipation and diarrhoea. Your doctor may also want to try antispasmodic or other medication occasionally. This medication may improve your problem temporarily but normally is not used for a long period.

Peppermint oil can relax the muscles in your intestine, and is sometimes used to treat symptoms of IBS.

Probiotics such as probiotic yoghurts, soy drinks, tablets and capsules (which contain live 'friendly' bacteria similar to those that live in your bowels) can help with digestion.

**Remember, Irritable Bowel Syndrome does not predispose you to more serious disorders.**

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