

factsheet 01



Diet and IBS

A guide to how your diet and lifestyle may affect symptoms of IBS

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Introduction

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a very common digestive condition that causes spasm and pain in the intestines.

Food is moved through the intestines by rhythmic and regular contractions of the muscles in the walls of the intestine. Sometimes these contractions are interrupted which can cause painful spasms.

IBS is a combination of this pain and also irregular bowel habits. Though troublesome, IBS is not linked with or known to lead to any serious illness.

What causes IBS?

There is no single, recognised cause of IBS. It is still a mystery why the intestinal muscles behave in this way. However, both diet and stress have been related to IBS, and both can influence the way the gut works.

20–65% of people with IBS believe their symptoms are caused by food.

How common is IBS?

It is thought that as many as 30% of the population may suffer from the condition – so you are not alone. Women are more likely to have the condition than men.

Symptoms of IBS

The most common symptoms of IBS are:

- Abdominal pain – often relieved by passing wind or by bowel movement
- Abdominal bloating
- Urgency
- The feeling of incomplete passing of stools
- Irregular bowel movements – either diarrhoea, constipation or a combination of both
- Stools may be small and hard like pellets or may be ribbon-like in appearance
- Stools may be covered in mucous
- Mucous may be passed on its own

BUT – blood in stools is not a symptom of IBS – if this occurs see your doctor as soon as possible.

Less common symptoms:

- Pain, brought on by bowel movements
- Headaches, sweating, flushing and dizziness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea, vomiting or belching

You may not experience all of the symptoms listed above – it varies greatly between individuals. Symptoms may last a few days or be present for weeks/months at a time. The pain may be slight or severe.

Unfortunately there is no cure for IBS. However making simple changes to your lifestyle can lessen the symptoms and keep IBS under control.

Diet and IBS

Eating a well balanced, varied diet is the cornerstone in helping to control symptoms of IBS.

Most people find the following helpful:

- Having small regular meals and snacks – they are easier for the digestive system to manage, rather than large and/or infrequent meals
- Taking time to eat do nothing else whilst you are eating.
- Eating slowly and chew food well, take plenty of time to relax afterwards
- Ensure good posture when eating – sit upright at a table
- Drink plenty of fluids – 8 to10 cups per day
- Avoid foods which you think makes your IBS worse

Your symptoms may be improved by altering the fibre content of your diet.

Increasing fibre can be beneficial if your symptoms are hard stools and/or constipation. It is important to increase your fibre intake gradually to avoid excess bloating and wind.

If your symptoms are predominantly diarrhoea you may need to reduce your fibre intake, especially if you suffer from bloating.

Fibre and IBS

The table below shows a variety of foods to help you select the correct food to either increase or decrease your fibre intake.

| Food Type | High fibre foods | Lower fibre foods |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Bread | Wholemeal, granary, high fibre white, rye | White |
| Breakfast cereals | Weetabix, shredded wheat, branflakes, porridge, muesli | Cornflakes, rice krispies, sugar puffs, coco pops |
| Rice and Pasta | Brown/ wholewheat | White |
| Fruits and vegetables | Pulses, cabbage, peas, beans, sweetcorn, onion, fruit with skin and seeds | Root vegetables, fruit with skins and seeds removed |
| Biscuit and crackers | Wholegrain crispbread, cracker wheat, oat cakes, digestives, hobnobs | Crackerbread, cheddar biscuits, rich tea, marie, plain crackers. |

Fibre and IBS (continued)

Fibre in foods can also be divided into soluble and insoluble fibre. Most people agree that increasing insoluble fibre is not beneficial for IBS, however it is advisable to have a mix of both types of fibre in your diet.

Insoluble fibre is found in:

- Wholemeal/granary bread
- Breakfast cereals containing wheat and bran
- Brown rice and pasta
- Whole wheat crackers and crispbreads

Soluble fibre is more likely to be beneficial, and is found in:

- Oats and oat products (oat cakes & porridge)
- Fruits and vegetables
- Peas, beans, pulses and lentils

Other links with IBS

In some people, IBS can be made worse by a sensitivity to certain food(s) – most commonly:

- Rich and spicy foods
- Drinks and foods containing caffeine
- Onion and garlic
- Some salad foods e.g. cucumber

Caffeine is a gastric irritant and stimulates muscle contractions in the intestines. This is likely to make IBS worse. Try to avoid caffeine containing drinks (coffee, tea and cola) and foods (chocolate) for a period of two weeks to see if your symptoms improve.

It is important to note that other foods may cause IBS symptoms. If you feel certain foods make your IBS worse it is important to talk to your dietitian.

Some people find that their IBS symptoms get worse during periods of stress and anxiety. Learning to relax can help reduce the symptoms.

It is virtually impossible to live a stress free life, however these are some suggestions to try and reduce stress:

- Take 10 minutes to yourself, everyday in a quiet place to relax and unwind
- Take regular gentle exercise e.g. walking, yoga, pilates
- Allow plenty of time for meals – avoid eating 'on the go'
- Try using relaxation tapes or books – they can teach useful techniques