

The Road to Healthy Aging

“Irritable Bowel Syndrome”

Do you suffer from abdominal cramping, gas, bloating, constipation, and/or diarrhea? These are extremely common complaints. As many as 20 percent of the adult population have similar symptoms, more commonly found in women, however the symptoms can vary from person to person. This disorder is often called Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Like many people, you may have only mild symptoms, but for some, this can be disabling. You may be unable to work, attend social events or even travel short distances. The effects of IBS can cause you to feel you're not living life to the fullest, leading to discouragement and anxiety.

Researchers have yet to discover any specific cause of IBS. The walls of the intestines are lined with layers of muscle that contract and relax in a coordinated rhythm as they move food from the stomach through your intestinal tract to your rectum. If you have IBS, the contractions may be stronger and last longer than usual, forcing food through more quickly causing gas, bloating and diarrhea. In some cases the opposite is true and stools become hard and dry causing constipation. The one thing that is clear is that IBS does not cause any harm to the intestinal wall, and does not lead to a serious disease such as cancer, Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis.

For reasons that aren't clear, if you have IBS, you probably react strongly to stimuli that don't bother other people. Many people find that their symptoms worsen when they eat certain foods. For example, wheat, chocolate, milk or alcohol can cause constipation or diarrhea. Carbonated beverages and some fruits and vegetables may lead to bloating and discomfort. Large meals can cause similar symptoms so eating smaller portions may be helpful. If needed, more specific blood testing can be done to evaluate each individual's level of reactivity to numerous foods, gluten, casein and whey (ALCAT testing). Testing for Celiac Disease should be part of your evaluation, since this is often overlooked. ALCAT testing can be invaluable in getting to the root cause of the problem.

A common observation is that stress significantly worsens IBS. Feeling mentally or physically tense, or generally overwhelmed, can stimulate colon spasms. The colon has many nerves that connect it to the brain. Like the heart and lungs, the colon is controlled by the autonomic nervous system which responds to stress. These nerves control normal contractions of the colon. People often experience “butterflies” when they are nervous and upset. In IBS, the colon can be overly responsive to even minimal conflict or stress.

Another possible cause of IBS is hormonal change. Because women are twice as likely to have IBS than men, researchers believe that hormonal changes do in fact play a role in

this condition. Many women find that their symptoms are aggravated during or around their menstrual cycles.

Unfortunately, many people suffer from IBS for a long time before seeking medical treatment. Up to 70 percent of people suffering from this are not receiving medical care. No cure has been found for IBS, but there are many options available to treat this. Often times, medications are initially prescribed to relieve symptoms. Your doctor may suggest fiber supplements or laxatives for constipation, or medicine to decrease diarrhea, for example, Imodium or Lomotil. An anti-spasmodic can be added to relieve pain and cramping. These can certainly help, however medications affect people differently, and no one medication or a combination of medications will work for everyone with IBS. If symptoms persist despite initial treatment, a colonoscopy or endoscopy may be needed to rule out any other significant medical concerns. A comprehensive stool analysis can also be an important tool in evaluating imbalances in gut health, enzyme deficiencies in digestion and absorption of foods, as well as potential overgrowth of unhealthy bacteria. Some red flag signs that might prompt your doctor to do additional testing can include significant weight loss, rectal bleeding, fever, recurrent vomiting or diarrhea that is persistent, or awakens you from sleep.

In many cases, simple changes in your diet and lifestyle can provide relief from IBS. Carbonated beverages, beans, cabbage and broccoli are notorious for being gas producing foods, and simply eliminating them can be helpful. The most common sources of food sensitivities include dairy products and gluten. It seems that everyone these days has a gluten sensitivity. If you eliminate these foods, and you feel better and have more energy, then you should keep them out of your diet for several months before adding them back in. However many people think they have a gluten sensitivity when in fact it is other foods that are creating the problem. You CAN be tested for this. Fiber can be a mixed blessing. Although it helps reduce constipation, it can also make gas and cramping worse. The best approach is to gradually increase the fiber in your diet over a period of weeks, and to drink plenty of water every day to minimize the gas and bloating, and to enable your bowels to move regularly.

Other important treatment options include exercise, yoga, meditation, hypnosis, or counseling which are all effective ways to relieve stress. Probiotics, or healthy bacteria that normally live in your intestines, are often deficient in people with IBS. Adding probiotics your diet, such as yogurt or kefir, and/or taking a powerful probiotic supplement can significantly ease your symptoms.

You need to learn as much about IBS as you can. Being informed about your condition is your first step, and this can help you take better charge of your life. There are many ways to treat this condition, and you CAN feel better!

Dr. Deborah Sainer received her medical degree from UMDNJ, New Jersey Medical School and is Board Certified in Internal Medicine and Emergency Medicine. She has been practicing for over 20 years, including the past 7 years at the Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Center in Centennial, CO., using an integrative approach to health. She is an active member of the American College of Anti-Aging Medicine and the Institute of Functional Medicine. Dr. Sainer has opened a new practice in Evergreen, Colorado, New Spring Integrative Medicine, and she can be reached at (720) 328-8784.