

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome

**Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)** is a **gastrointestinal** (digestive) problem that affects up to 15% of adults (during their lifetimes) in developed countries. Irritable bowel syndrome is a functional disorder, meaning that there is a problem with the functioning of the bowel rather than in the structure of the bowel, such as an obstruction or a tumor. Irritable bowel syndrome is completely different from **Crohn disease** or **ulcerative colitis**, which are inflammatory diseases of the intestine. Having IBS does not increase the risk of developing colon cancer. **Gastroenterologists** (doctors with specialized training in treating disorders of the bowel and other digestive organs) may be consulted to help diagnose and treat IBS. The February 22, 2006, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about irritable bowel syndrome. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the August 18, 2004, issue of *JAMA*.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF IBS

- Bloating and gas (particularly after eating)
- Abdominal cramping
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Urgency to have a bowel movement, sometimes right after having one
- Abnormal stool form (including the passage of mucus)

Medical testing may be done to rule out other causes of these symptoms. Blood in the stool is an important reason to see your doctor. It is not a typical symptom of IBS.

## WHAT MAKES IBS WORSE?

- Stress
- Eating a large meal
- High-fat meals
- Menstrual periods

If your symptoms become worse after drinking milk or eating other dairy products, you may have **lactose** intolerance. This intolerance is the inability to digest the sugars (lactose) found in milk and is not part of IBS. Foods themselves do not cause IBS. However, persons with IBS may find that certain foods make their symptoms worse.

## TREATMENT

- Reduce stress.
- Eat a healthful, balanced diet and avoid foods that trigger an increase in your symptoms.
- Small meals during the day (instead of 3 large meals) may be beneficial.
- Engage in regular physical exercise.
- Medications commonly used to treat IBS symptoms include antispasmodics to decrease spasms in the bowel, antidepressants to reduce pain, and antiarrheals to reduce stool frequency.
- A prescription medication is available for short-term use in women with IBS whose primary symptom is constipation.

Sources: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, Irritable Bowel Syndrome Association, International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders

Janet M. Torpy, MD, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases  
[www.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.niddk.nih.gov)
- International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders  
[www.iffgd.org](http://www.iffgd.org)
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome Association  
[www.ibsassociation.org](http://www.ibsassociation.org)

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