



Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a disorder that affects the normal functioning of the large bowel. It causes symptoms like stomach cramps, bloating, diarrhoea and constipation. The condition is usually lifelong, although the symptoms may come and go or change over time. The exact cause of IBS is unknown, but it is believed that it can be triggered by food passing through the gut too quickly or too slowly, various infections, oversensitive nerves in the gut, high levels of stress, as well as a family history of IBS. Although there's no cure for IBS, diet changes and medicines can often help control the symptoms.

According to NICE, IBS affects between 10% and 20% of the general population in the UK, but most often occurs in people between the ages of 20 and 30 years and is twice as common in women as in men.





Symptoms

The symptoms of IBS can differ between affected individuals and often vary over time. However, the main four symptoms are:

- stomach pains or cramps – they are usually worse after eating and improve after going to the toilet
- bloating – stomach may feel uncomfortably full and swollen
- diarrhoea – frequent loose or watery stools
- constipation – not passing stools regularly or being unable to completely empty bowel

Other symptoms may include:

- flatulence (farting)
- passing mucus from your bottom
- feeling sick (nausea)
- tiredness
- backache
- bowel incontinence (not being able to control your bowel)
- urinary problems, such as frequent need or sudden urge to urinate, feeling like you cannot fully empty your bladder

How is IBS diagnosed?

If you are having symptoms of IBS, contact your GP. They will want to know exactly what symptoms you have, how often and when you get them, if they come and go, as well as how long you've had them for. Therefore, before the appointment it would be worth completing a [symptoms diary](#) as it can help the GP understand your problem. There's no test for IBS so the clinician will diagnose the condition based on your symptoms. They may also arrange some tests to rule out other possible causes of your symptoms, for instance a blood test to check for problems like coeliac disease or tests on a sample of your poo to check for infections and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). You will not usually need further tests in hospital and a referral to a Specialist unless the GP is not sure what the problem is. If the GP thinks you have IBS, they'll talk to you about what it is and what the treatment options are available.



Managing Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Although there is no cure for IBS, the symptoms can often be managed by making changes to your diet and lifestyle. Medication is also sometimes prescribed to treat the individual symptoms experienced, for example antispasmodics to reduce abdominal pain and cramping, laxatives to relieve constipation, and antimotility medicines to relieve diarrhoea. Your GP will help you decide which medicines are best for you.

There's no single diet that works for everyone with IBS but following these general tips can help you relieve the symptoms:

- Eat regular meals and give yourself plenty of time to eat
- Don't skip meals or leave long gaps between eating
- Cook homemade meals using fresh ingredients
- Drink at least 8 cups of fluid a day, particularly water or other non-caffeinated drinks



- Avoid drinking more than 3 cups of coffee or tea a day
- Cut down on alcohol and fizzy drinks
- Avoid eating more than 3 portions of fresh fruit a day (a portion is about 80 g)
- Limit the amount of fatty, spicy and processed foods
- Try probiotics for a month to see if they help
- If you have diarrhoea, avoid artificial sweeteners, such as sorbitol (found in sugar-free sweets, drinks, and chewing gum)
- If you have wind or bloating, try eating oats (for example, porridge or oat-based breakfast cereal) and linseeds (up to 1 tablespoon a day)

It would be also worth keeping a food diary in order to find out which foods are easier for you to digest and which foods make your IBS symptoms worse.

If you are following your doctor's advice about diet and lifestyle but it has not helped, you may be referred to a dietician who will offer specialised advice and recommend specific diet, such as [The Low FODMAP Diet](#).





Reducing your stress levels may also reduce the frequency and severity of your IBS symptoms. Some ways to help relieve stress include:

- [Breathing exercises](#)
- [Mindfulness meditation](#)
- Physical activities such as [Yoga](#), [Pilates](#), [walking](#), [running](#), [swimming](#)

If you are particularly stressed, you may benefit from a talking therapy, such as stress counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). You can refer yourself directly to an [NHS psychological therapies service \(IAPT\)](#) without a referral from a GP. Also, if you can afford it, you can choose private therapy. The British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) keeps a [register of all accredited therapists in the UK](#).

Also, you may want to try hypnotherapy – some people has reported its effectiveness, however there's no strong evidence to suggest that alternative treatments like this one can alleviate the symptoms of IBS. Hypnotherapy can be obtained through approved therapists who should be members of the British Medical Hypnotherapy Association. Ask about a type of therapy called gut directed hypnotherapy.

Additional resources

- Guts UK! Charity's [All you need to know about Irritable Bowel Syndrome \(IBS\)](#)
- NHS' [Irritable Bowel Syndrome: a self-help guide](#)
- IBS Network's [Diet for Irritable Bowel Syndrome \(IBS\) Constipation](#)

References

- [NHS](#)
- [NICE](#)
- [Guts UK!](#)



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