

Q&A: Irritable bowel syndrome and lifestyle modifications

July 14 2022



Credit: Cliff Booth from Pexels

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I have been diagnosed with a mild case of irritable bowel syndrome, and I talked to my doctor about managing my symptoms without medication. I am interested in trying to focus more on

diet to control my condition. Are there certain things that I should be mindful of, or will medication be the only way for me to manage my symptoms?

ANSWER: Although medications can be used to treat [irritable bowel syndrome](#), not everyone who has this disorder will require or need medication. For some people—particularly those with [mild symptoms](#)—lifestyle adjustments, such as diet modification, [stress management](#) and regular exercise, are enough to control symptoms. For moderate to [severe symptoms](#), a combination of lifestyle changes and medication may be necessary to manage irritable bowel syndrome.

Irritable bowel syndrome affects the large and sometimes small intestines. The walls of the intestines are lined with layers of muscle that contract and relax in a coordinated rhythm as they move food through the digestive tract. When you have irritable bowel syndrome, those contractions may be stronger or more noticeable than normal. That can lead to abdominal cramping and pain as food, gas or stool passes through the intestines. Irritable bowel syndrome also is associated with bowel irregularity, such as diarrhea or constipation. Other symptoms can include gas and bloating.

In those diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome, it's important to be aware that some abdominal issues are not associated with this disorder and could signal another underlying problem. In particular, these symptoms require prompt medical attention: blood in the stool, unexplained or rapid weight loss, unrelenting or severe abdominal pain, unexplained vomiting, significant pain with or difficulty swallowing, or an abdominal mass or lump.

Irritable bowel syndrome is a chronic condition, and symptoms tend to come and go over time. There's no cure, but symptoms often can be eased with diet, lifestyle and stress management.

More than 60% of people who have irritable bowel syndrome say their symptoms are connected to food in some way. However, because symptoms vary significantly from one person to another, it's difficult to give specific dietary advice that works for everyone with this disorder.

In general, though, eating [high-fiber foods](#) and drinking plenty of fluids are beneficial for many people with irritable bowel syndrome. Avoid foods and beverages that contribute to gas and bloating, including carbonated and [alcoholic beverages](#); caffeine; raw fruit; and vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower. Reducing or eliminating gluten may ease diarrhea that's related to irritable bowel syndrome.

Research has shown that certain carbohydrates, known as fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides and polyols (FODMAP), can lead to abdominal pain, bloating and gas in people with irritable bowel syndrome. These are found in certain fruits and vegetables; wheat; rye; legumes; foods that contain lactose, such as milk, cheese and yogurt; and artificial sweeteners.

Following a diet low in FODMAPs can ease symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. But because so many foods contain these compounds, it can be difficult for patients to create such a diet on their own. Finding a dietitian familiar with irritable bowel syndrome can help. A dietitian can review a patient's symptoms and dietary needs, discuss recommended dietary changes, and develop an individualized [food](#) plan to ease symptoms.

Stress also affects irritable bowel syndrome, with episodes of higher stress associated with an increase in symptoms. Using stress reduction techniques and participating in activities that relieve stress, such as yoga and meditation, may decrease stress-related flare-ups. Working with a therapist or counselor experienced in stress management, mindfulness and behavior modification also may help those with irritable bowel

syndrome better control stress and ease symptoms.

Regular exercise is recommended for people who have irritable bowel syndrome. Daily physical activity relieves [stress](#), stimulates normal contractions of the intestines and promotes overall wellness.

If lifestyle changes alone aren't enough to keep irritable bowel syndrome from disrupting daily life, talk to your health care professional about medication options. A wide variety of prescription and nonprescription medications are available to treat irritable bowel syndrome.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

Citation: Q&A: Irritable bowel syndrome and lifestyle modifications (2022, July 14) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-07-qa-bowel-syndrome-lifestyle-modifications.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--