

# What is irritable bowel syndrome?

June 7 2023, by Ann Schreiber

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People who suffer from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) know it is a highly unpleasant chronic condition that can trigger abdominal pain, diarrhea and constipation.

Here, experts will unravel the mysteries of IBS, exploring its causes, symptoms and treatments. And of course, don't forget about the role of diet. Experts will break down the best foods to eat and those to avoid for a happy gut.

## What is irritable bowel syndrome?

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), irritable bowel syndrome is a common disorder targeting the [gastrointestinal tract](#), encompassing the stomach and intestines. This chronic condition manifests through a range of distressing symptoms, including cramping, [abdominal pain](#), bloating, excessive gas and the frustrating duo of diarrhea and constipation, which may occur individually or even simultaneously.

Dealing with IBS requires a long-term management approach to address its persistent impact on daily life effectively.

## What causes IBS?

The exact causes of [irritable bowel syndrome](#) remain uncertain, according to the [National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Issues](#) (NIDDK). However, experts believe that a combination of factors contributes to its development. IBS is considered a functional gastrointestinal (GI) disorder involving the intricate interaction between the brain and the gut.

Here are some potential causes and factors that may play a role in IBS:

- Problems with brain-gut interaction. Brain and gut communication can impact the body's functioning, triggering IBS symptoms. This can include abnormal food movement through the [digestive tract](#), resulting in changes in bowel movements, and

experiencing pain even with average amounts of gas or stool in the gut.

- Stressful or difficult early-life events. Traumatic experiences during childhood, such as physical or sexual abuse, have been associated with an increased risk of developing IBS.
- Mental disorders. Conditions like depression, anxiety and [somatic symptom disorder](#) are more common among individuals with IBS and may contribute to its onset.
- Bacterial infections. Infections of the digestive tract caused by certain bacteria have been linked to developing IBS.
- Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth. In terms of increased numbers or changes in the bacterial type, an overgrowth of bacteria in the small intestine has been associated with IBS.
- Food intolerances or sensitivities. Some individuals with IBS may experience digestive symptoms triggered by specific foods, indicating intolerances or sensitivities to certain dietary components.

The causes of IBS can vary among individuals, highlighting this condition's complexity.

## IBS symptoms

In a recent video with [Dr. Jennifer Webster](#), a pediatric gastroenterologist with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, she indicates that "the tricky thing about IBS is that there is [no specific test that we can use to say 100% you have this](#). We do lots of testing to rule out other diseases. Similar to migraines, there isn't a test, but we know that the pain is real and the symptoms are real."

While some studies suggest potential differences in the prevalence and severity of IBS symptoms between men and women, it is worth noting that the core symptoms are relatively similar.

Here are some typical symptoms of IBS in men and women, according to [Johns Hopkins Medicine](#):

- Abdominal pain or cramping. This is one of the hallmark symptoms of IBS. The pain is often described as a lower abdominal discomfort or cramping sensation that may vary in intensity.
- Bloating and distention. Many individuals with IBS experience bloating, a feeling of increased pressure or fullness in the abdomen. This can be accompanied by visible abdominal distention or swelling.
- Altered bowel habits. IBS can lead to changes in bowel movements. These changes can include diarrhea, characterized by loose or watery stools, and constipation, characterized by infrequent or difficult bowel movements. Some individuals may alternate between episodes of diarrhea and constipation.
- Excessive gas. Many people with IBS may notice increased gas production, leading to bloating, belching or flatulence.
- Urgency or an incomplete bowel movement. Some individuals with IBS may experience a sense of urgency to have a bowel movement or feel as though they haven't fully emptied their bowels after a bowel movement.
- Mucus in the stool. In some cases, people with IBS may notice the presence of mucus in their stool.

## **Can a specific diet for IBS help with symptoms?**

When managing symptoms of IBS, changing your diet can play a significant role. Here are some common dietary recommendations for individuals with IBS:

The NIDDK suggests the following [foods to eat with irritable bowel syndrome](#):

- Increase fiber intake. Focus on incorporating sources of soluble fiber, such as oats, bananas, carrots and psyllium husk, into your diet.
- Avoid gluten. Avoiding gluten-containing grains like wheat, barley and rye may be beneficial for individuals with gluten sensitivity or celiac disease. Opt for gluten-free alternatives like quinoa, rice and gluten-free oats.
- Follow a low-FODMAP diet. Following a special diet known as the low-[FODMAP diet](#) may provide relief for some individuals with IBS. This diet for IBS involves temporarily restricting certain high-FODMAP foods, such as onions, garlic, wheat and fruits such as apples, cherries, nectarines, pears and watermelon, or juice containing any of these fruits, then gradually reintroducing them to identify specific triggers.

## IBS treatments

The treatment of IBS aims to alleviate symptoms, allowing individuals to live as [symptom](#)-free as possible. Depending on your symptoms, your [health care provider](#) may recommend different approaches on how to treat your IBS, including medication and IBS self-care strategies. Here are some commonly prescribed [irritable bowel syndrome medications](#) as indicated by the Mayo Clinic:

- Alosetron (Lotronex). This medication is designed to relax the colon and slow down the movement of waste through the lower bowel. It is primarily prescribed for severe cases of IBS in women and is not approved for use in men.
- Eluxadoline (Viberzi). Eluxadoline is a medication that aids in reducing diarrhea by decreasing fluid secretion and muscle contractions in the intestine while simultaneously enhancing muscle tone in the rectum.
- Rifaximin (Xifaxan). This antibiotic decreases bacterial

overgrowth in the gut and relieves diarrhea symptoms.

- Lubiprostone (Amitiza). Lubiprostone increases fluid secretion in the small intestine, aiding in the passage of stool. It is approved for women with IBS with constipation.
- Linaclotide (Linzess). Linaclotide also increases fluid secretion in the small intestine to facilitate [bowel](#) movements.

## Living with IBS

Living with IBS can be challenging, but there are ways to manage its [symptoms](#) and improve your quality of life. Working closely with [health care professionals](#) allows you to explore dietary modifications, medication options and self-care strategies tailored to your needs.

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