

Patient Education Form

What You Should Know About Irritable Bowel Syndrome

What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder that may affect up to 30% of all Americans at some time during their lives. The disorder has many names, including nervous colon, spastic colon, spastic bowel, mucous colitis and spastic colitis. However, it should not be confused with diseases like ulcerative or Crohn's colitis.

IBS is a syndrome, a pattern of symptoms such as pain and bloating that tend to occur together. It is not life-threatening. The underlying cause of this disorder is an abnormality in the way the intestinal muscles contract. These muscles, which form the outer layer of the intestine, work automatically to move food products along the intestine to the rectum and out the anus. IBS is a disorder of the function of the intestinal muscles. Even when the muscles appear normal under a microscope, they may not function normally, contracting too forcefully or weakly, too slowly or rapidly, at certain times.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

People with IBS may experience constipation, diarrhea, or a combination of both. In addition, IBS may produce cramps, urgency or a gassy, bloated feeling in the abdomen. Mucus, sometimes seen in the bowel movements, is also a symptom of IBS.

How is IBS treated?

Simply understanding that IBS is not a serious condition may relieve anxiety and stress, which often contribute to the problem. Stress reduction can help relieve the symptoms of IBS in some individuals. In others, increasing the amount of non-digestible, bulk-forming foods in the diet may be all that is needed to relieve symptoms. Adding fiber to your diet may eliminate or lessen the symptoms and result in softer stools that pass along the intestine more easily and absorb excess water in the intestine to prevent diarrhea. When the major complaint is constipation, additional water should be provided in the diet along with bulk agents to soften the stool. In some cases, adding fiber alone may not provide adequate relief from cramping and bloating. Your physician may prescribe medications that act directly on the intestinal muscles to help the contractions return to normal.

How long does the treatment take to relieve symptoms?

Patience is extremely important in dealing with this problem. The tendency for the intestine to respond to stress will always be present. With attention to proper diet, an increase in fiber, and in some cases, use of appropriate medications, the symptoms of IBS can be greatly improved or eliminated.

Are there any foods to be avoided?

Sometimes, caffeine, milk products or alcohol can make symptoms of IBS worse. Avoiding foods that contain significant amounts of caffeine (i.e...coffee, tea, cola drinks) and avoiding dairy products (i.e...cheese, milk) can relieve symptoms.

How can I tell if the problem is IBS or something else?

A careful medical history and physical examination by your physician are essential to proper diagnosis. Tests performed to ensure that your symptoms are not caused by other problems may include sigmoidoscopy, colonoscopy, stool cards, and/or x-ray examination of the intestines. These tests may rule out other diseases or conditions (i.e...cancer, diverticulitis, or inflammation of the intestines).

Can IBS lead to more serious problems?

IBS does not cause cancer, bleeding or inflammatory bowel disease, such as ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease. Over the long term, IBS can be associated with but does not cause diverticulosis, "pockets" in the intestinal wall, which is a benign condition. This can occasionally result in diverticulitis, an inflammatory condition of one or more of the diverticula or "pockets" in the intestine that sometimes requires surgery. Treatment of IBS with bulk agents helps to prevent diverticulosis and other colon problems.