

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome

## What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a chronic (long-lasting) disorder of the large intestine. (The large intestine is also called the colon or large bowel.) IBS is not a disease. It's a condition in which the bowel does not always work normally. Although IBS can cause much distress, it does not damage the bowel and does not lead to life-threatening illness.

IBS is the most common intestinal disorder. It affects more women than men and usually starts in early adulthood. Sometimes it is referred to as spastic colon.

You may have flare-ups of symptoms throughout your life. Although a cure hasn't been found yet, the disorder can usually be controlled. IBS will not progress to something worse.

## What is the cause?

The cause of IBS is not well understood. Changes in the nerves and muscles in the bowel or in the central nervous system may be a cause. For example, the nerves in the bowel may make the muscles contract too much when you eat. These contractions can make food move too fast through the intestines, causing gas, bloating, cramping, and diarrhea. In other cases abnormal contractions may slow the passage of food and delay bowel movements, causing cramps and constipation.

Some foods may trigger attacks. Sometimes the symptoms of IBS may be caused by intestinal gas or an illness such as stomach flu. Other possible triggers of attacks are hormonal changes, emotional stress, or depression.

IBS seems to occur more often in families where a parent has the disorder.

## What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms include:

- Cramping and pain in the abdomen, which may be mild or severe
- Constipation or diarrhea
- A lot of gas

Other symptoms include:

- Bloating
- A feeling of fullness in the rectum

Symptoms often occur after you have eaten a big meal or when you are under stress. Women may have more symptoms during their menstrual periods. You may feel better after you have a bowel movement.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history. Your provider will examine your abdomen and may do a rectal exam.

There is no specific test for IBS. The diagnosis is usually based on the symptoms. Your provider may do tests to look for other possible causes of the symptoms, such as:

- Blood tests
- Tests of bowel movement samples
- Hydrogen breath test to check for sensitivity to lactose, a sugar in milk and milk products
- Colonoscopy or sigmoidoscopy, which are procedures that allow your provider to see the inside of the colon with a thin, flexible, lighted tube
- Barium enema, which is a procedure that uses X-rays and a liquid dye passed into the colon through the rectum to check the colon

Your healthcare provider may ask you to try a milk-free diet to see if lactose intolerance (trouble digesting milk products) may be causing your symptoms. Or your provider may suggest not eating foods with gluten for a certain amount of time to see if the symptoms then go away. This is a way to check for gluten intolerance (called celiac disease), which can cause symptoms similar to the symptoms of IBS. The most common gluten-containing foods are wheat products, like bread and pasta.

## How is it treated?

Doctors have not yet found a cure for IBS. However, controlling the diet and managing stress usually relieves the symptoms. Some medicines may also help.

- **Diet**

Talk to your healthcare provider about whether you should eat more or less high-fiber food or take a fiber supplement. Try eating smaller meals more often each day rather than just 2 or 3 larger meals. Avoid foods that cause gas, such as carbonated drinks, cabbage, and beans. Other foods that may cause symptoms are:

- Fatty foods, such as French fries
- Milk products, such as cheese or ice cream
- Chocolate
- Caffeine (found in coffee and some sodas)

- **Food diary**

Your healthcare provider may ask you to keep a food diary to see if eating a particular food, for example, milk, worsens your symptoms.

- **Stress**

Your provider will help you identify things that cause stress in your life and will suggest ways to help you control them. Relaxation or biofeedback techniques may help you manage stress.

- **Medicines**

Examples of medicines your provider may prescribe are:

- Bulk-forming agents, such as bran or methylcellulose
- Antispasmodic drugs to slow contractions in the bowel and help with diarrhea and pain
- Antidepressants, which can help control chronic pain.
- Medicines to help with constipation or diarrhea

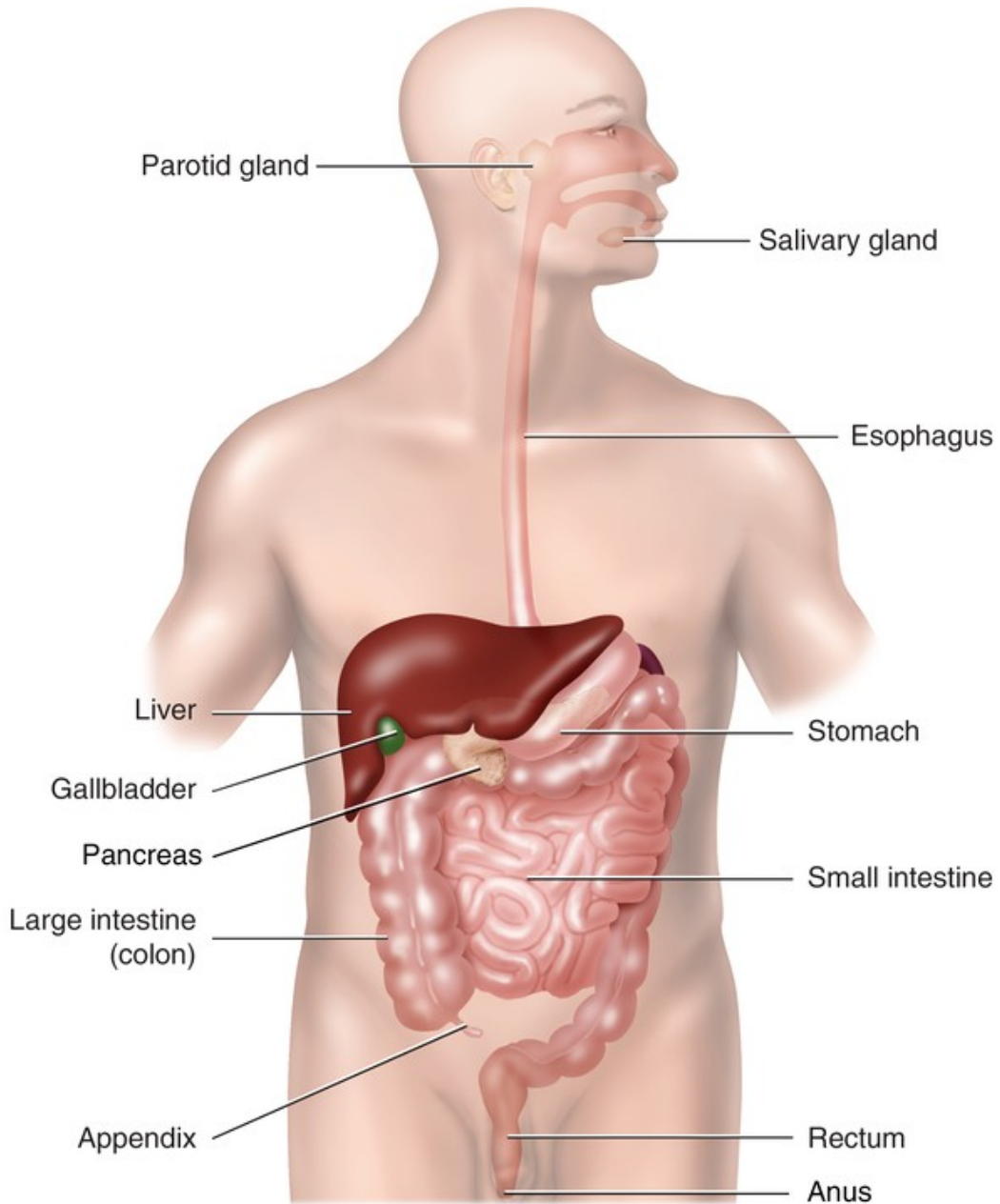
## **How can I take care of myself?**

- Follow your healthcare provider's recommendations.
- Learn ways to reduce stress and anxiety. Professional counseling may be helpful.
- Exercise regularly, according to your provider's recommendations. Exercise helps keep bowel movements regular. It may also help maintain serotonin levels in the brain, which can lessen depression and stress symptoms.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Don't drink alcohol, which can make symptoms of IBS worse.
- Choose your foods carefully. If a food seems to bring on symptoms, avoid it. However, don't eliminate a food just because it appears to cause symptoms one time. Be sure that a food produces symptoms several times before you give it up. You should try to keep many different foods in your diet because a varied diet gives better nutrition.
- Eat smaller meals more often. For example, eat 4 to 6 small meals a day rather than 3 large ones.

Developed by RelayHealth.

*This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.*

# Digestive System



Copyright ©2014 McKesson Corporation and/or one of its subsidiaries. All rights reserved.