



Common Questions About

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

What is IBS?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a group of symptoms that occur over a long-term. In IBS there are problems with the way bowel nerves and muscles work. No one knows for sure what causes IBS. But IBS can be managed so that you feel better.

How do I know if I have IBS?

A doctor should make a diagnosis of IBS. The diagnosis is based mostly on certain symptoms that occur with IBS. Your doctor will also do a physical exam and some tests.

What are symptoms of IBS?

The main symptoms of IBS occur for at least several months. They include pain or discomfort in your belly (abdomen), and irregular bowel movements with constipation and/or diarrhea. The pain can at times be worse after eating. It may feel better by having a bowel movement.

Some other common symptoms include bloating, gas, passage of mucus, urgency, or a feeling of not completely emptying.

Is IBS a risk factor for other serious disease?

IBS does not put you at risk for other serious disease.

Do certain foods affect IBS symptoms?

This varies from person to person. Certain foods stimulate the digestive tract and eating too much of these might make you feel worse. At times your bowel might over-respond to even a normal meal. Your doctor or a nutrition specialist can help you identify foods that may be a problem for you.

How is IBS treated?

Begin by learning more about IBS. Look for things in your life that you have control over which may be related to your symptoms, like diet and getting enough exercise. Stress may worsen symptoms, and having IBS is itself a stress. Taking an active role in your self-care can reduce that stress.

There are medicines your doctor may choose from. Examples include drugs to reduce muscle spasms, diarrhea, or constipation. Newer prescription drugs may need to be taken on a more long-term basis to relieve the pain and improve your bowel changes.

Other therapies may be helpful. Relaxation therapy can help promote well-being. Hypnosis and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) each may reduce pain and other IBS symptoms; these need to be delivered by trained therapists well-informed about IBS.

You'll need to work with your provider to develop a long-term plan to manage your symptoms. Be sure to ask questions so you understand any treatment and options, and why the treatment is important for you. Know the risks as well as benefits, and know what to do if side effects occur or symptoms return.

Why would my doctor prescribe an antidepressant to treat my IBS if I'm not depressed?

Low-dose antidepressants can help to reduce pain and also overall symptoms. The doses for this are much lower than what is used to treat depression.

Where can I learn more?

Learn more on our website at www.aboutIBS.org, or in our fact sheet No. 101.

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