

Patient education: Irritable bowel syndrome (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome, or "IBS," is a condition that causes belly pain and problems with bowel movements. Some people with the condition have frequent, watery bowel movements (diarrhea). Others do not have enough bowel movements (constipation). Some patients switch back and forth between diarrhea and constipation.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

Symptoms include:

- Stomach pain and cramps, related to a bowel movement
- Diarrhea or constipation (some people switch back and forth between diarrhea and constipation)
- Bloating
- Gas

Is there a test for IBS?

No, there is no specific test. But your doctor or nurse can figure out if you have IBS by asking you a few questions, and by running tests to make sure you do not have something other than IBS. Lots of medical conditions can cause the same symptoms as IBS. So it is important that your doctor or nurse checks the other possibilities.

What can I do to feel better?

You can:

- Start a diary to keep track of what you ate each day, what you did, and how you felt. That way, you can figure out if anything you do or eat makes your symptoms better or worse.
- Stop eating foods that might be making your IBS worse. Start by giving up foods that give you gas, and then give up milk, ice cream, and other foods that have traces of milk for 2 weeks. Ask your doctor or nurse for advice on which foods can make IBS worse.
- Eat more fiber, if you have constipation. You can do this by eating more fruits and vegetables. Or you can take fiber pills or powders. (If eating more fiber makes symptoms worse, cut back on the fiber.)
- Exercise. Do something active for 20 to 60 minutes, 3 to 5 days a week. Studies show this helps improve IBS symptoms.

How is IBS treated?

Medicines can ease the symptoms of IBS. But no treatment can cure the condition. Counseling might also help with IBS, because stress and worry can make the condition worse.

The medicines that can help with IBS symptoms include:

- Medicines to ease diarrhea
- Medicines to ease constipation
- Antidepressants – These medicines work by blocking pain. When used to treat IBS, they are given at a much lower dose than would normally be given to treat depression.
- Medicines called "antispasmodics"
- Antibiotics – These medicines sometimes help with bloating and diarrhea in some people.

What will my life be like?

Most people with IBS have the condition for the rest of their life. Even so, most people find ways to improve their symptoms. The key is to keep working with your doctor or nurse until the two of you find an approach that works.

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