

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME (IBS)

Irritable bowel syndrome has many names including spastic colon, colitis, IBS, functional colitis, irritable colon, nervous indigestion, mucous colitis, and laxative colitis. It is a disorder of the intestines causing abdominal pain, increased bowel movements, and gas. It is usually brought on by increased emotional stress. The intestines are not able to regulate how quickly food passes through. They then over or under compensate, causing diarrhea or constipation. Females, age 20–30, are most often affected.

Symptoms *may* include:

- Abdominal pain, tenderness, cramping, or rectal pain following meals and often relieved by bowel movements
- Mucous covered, bloody, or black and tarry stools
- Bloating, fullness or gas; possible nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhea or a combination of diarrhea and constipation
- Depression, anxiety, headache, fatigue and difficulty concentrating

What *your* doctor can do:

- Diagnose the disease by asking many questions about your symptoms, performing a physical exam, ordering lab tests (blood and stool), X-rays, and other tests as needed.
- Perform a *sigmoidoscopy* or *colonoscopy* (a flexible tube-like scope to examine either the rectum and lower colon or the entire colon).
- Rule out many other possible conditions for diagnosis. Often, no abnormalities are found.

What *you* can do:

- Treatment is that which prevents the colitis from occurring. Identify triggers so that you may avoid them, and reduce stress.
- Reduce stress with relaxation, counseling, or lifestyle changes.
- Avoid laxatives, multiple medications, and any unnecessary medications.
- Eat a low fat, high fiber diet in small, frequent meals.
- Avoid spicy food, caffeine, and alcohol.
- Keep a food diary to help you know and avoid foods that trigger colitis.
- Stop smoking, which is very irritating to the digestive tract. Talk to your doctor if you need help. There are many possible aids if you are ready to quit.
- Take prescribed antispasmodics and/or tranquilizers as needed.
- Exercise regularly and avoid fatigue. Poor physical fitness can worsen the condition.

What you can expect:

- Symptoms can usually be reduced or eliminated with lifestyle changes and self-treatment outlined above.
- Possible complications include chronic abdominal discomfort or tenderness, chronic depression or anxiety, dehydration or malnutrition from food passing too quickly and not being absorbed.

Contact your doctor if you have fever, vomiting, bloody or tarry black stools; if you lose more than 10 pounds in a short period of time or have a change in your bowel habit lasting more than 10 days.