



Talking to your Doctor About Irritable Bowel Syndrome

A publication of the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD)

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a disturbance of bowel function that includes symptoms of abdominal pain or discomfort and altered bowel habit (change in frequency or consistency) – chronic or recurrent diarrhea, constipation, or both in alteration. Additional symptoms may be experienced such as bloating, feeling of urgency or incomplete evacuation, or the passage of mucus with stool. The impact of IBS varies with each individual. For some people, it may severely compromise quality of life.

IBS is characterized by intestinal abnormalities involving motility (involuntary contractions within the digestive tract), sensation, and perception. Heightened sensitivity can cause normally non-painful stimuli within the bowel to be experienced as painful. IBS is a multifaceted disorder. While there is no known cure, it can usually be managed. The exact cause of IBS is unknown, and it is becoming recognized that many factors can contribute to the symptoms we recognize as IBS.

In individuals with IBS, no structural or biochemical abnormalities are seen upon examination. The absence of a definitive biological marker to diagnose IBS may result in a tendency for physicians to overdo diagnostic procedures, or for patients to ask for them. Recent symptom based diagnostic criteria (the Rome Criteria) help to make a reliable diagnosis possible. These criteria are based on the presentation of a specific set of symptoms. In addition, a physical examination and limited diagnostic tests help confirm this diagnosis with a high level of confidence. Extensive radiologic, motility, and endoscopic testing may be reserved for specific situations. Signs or symptoms not associated with IBS that suggest another cause include: rectal bleeding, weight loss, fever, awakening from sleep at night, family history of colon cancer or inflammatory bowel disease, and onset of symptoms (or change in symptoms) over the age of 50.

There is no single medication available to treat the multiple symptoms of IBS. Like other chronic diseases, managing irritable bowel syndrome is not easy. Effective management is often dependent on a successful patient-doctor relationship. Although the time you spend with your doctor may be limited, you can help ensure that

effective two-way communication takes place during your visit.

We encourage you to be proactive in your own health maintenance. Make the most out of your doctor visit—be prepared. Complete the worksheet on the back of this page and take it to your doctor. By providing your physician with this information, he or she may be able to gain a greater insight not ordinarily attainable during a standard 15-minute appointment.

Developing a Treatment Plan

1. Begin by educating yourself about IBS. Symptoms can be mild, moderate, or severe. They are chronic, intermittent, frequently variable, and often manageable.
2. If your doctor has already made a diagnosis of IBS, stop worrying that it is “something else.”
3. Use a diary for a week or two to identify factors that might bring on symptoms or make your condition worse and discuss this with your doctor. (IFFGD has designed a *Daily Diary* for this purpose.)
4. Talk to your doctor about treatment goals, develop a plan that is appropriate for you, and discuss options for managing severe pain and other symptoms. Working in partnership with a knowledgeable healthcare provider helps obtain the best possible results.

TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR

When you visit your doctor you will want to know what is wrong, what the physician can do to treat it, and what you can do to better manage it. Your physician will begin by taking a history asking for a description of the symptoms as well as possible factors that can bring them on or make them better. This will be followed by a physical examination, possibly diagnostic tests, a diagnosis, and a discussion of treatment options.

Symptoms of IBS, though chronic or recurrent, can vary in duration, intensity, and description. Management of symptoms often is not easy and requires individual participation while working with a physician or healthcare provider. Don't be afraid to ask questions; write them down before your appointment. As a patient with IBS, you should never feel devalued, ignored, or uncomfortable with your doctor. If you do, or if your concerns are not being met, it is time to change to another physician. Your goal is to obtain a diagnosis, understand IBS and your symptoms, and develop a management or treatment plan designed to meet your individual needs.

The course of IBS is highly individualized and can be challenging to even the most knowledgeable and caring physician. Be organized when you visit your doctor. Here are some things you can do to help make your physician visit most effective.

1. List your symptoms and how frequently they occur. Try to be as specific as you can. For example, describe where pain is located, how often it occurs, and what makes it worse or better. Keeping a daily diary for a couple of weeks that lists symptoms and associated activities can help sort this out.

Symptom	Frequency
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. Provide your doctor with a list of all other chronic illness currently affecting your health, and of prior infectious gastrointestinal illness.

3. List all prescription and nonprescription (over-the-counter) medications as well as herbal supplements you currently take. Include dosage and frequency.

Medication	Dosage	Frequency
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

4. Inform your doctor of any previous gastrointestinal procedures or tests. Samples would include colonoscopy, sigmoidoscopy, endoscopy, and ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography).

Year	Procedure / Test	Results
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

5. Inform your doctor of any previous surgeries, especially abdominal or gastrointestinal surgeries.

Year	Surgery
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

6. Use the space below to write down any other questions you may have for your doctor or to take notes during the appointment. It is imperative that you walk away from your doctor's appointment with a clear understanding of what he or she tells you. Therefore, do not be hesitant to ask questions.
