

## - Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

# THE ABC OF IBS

BY MARISA COHEN



The gut is a complicated place, and sometimes things can get out of sync there, leading to belly pain, mad dashes to the bathroom and other symptoms. The most common GI disorder is irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), which affects up to 15 per cent of the world's population, according to Monash University.

The two main symptoms of IBS are pain related to having a bowel movement and changes in frequency and/or consistency of stool, as in diarrhoea, constipation, or both, says gastroenterologist Dr Neha Mathur.

"If you have one day of diarrhoea every two or three months, that is likely food- or environment-related and is not IBS," adds gastroenterologist Dr Ashkan Farhadi. "But if you have it over and over at least three times a week and it happens for three months, it might be IBS." Other symptoms may include bloating, gas, and the feeling that you can't quite get everything out when you poo.

The pathology of IBS is still a bit of a mystery, says Dr Mathur. Unlike inflammatory bowel disease, which is connected to inflammation in the GI tract, IBS doesn't involve inflammation, ulcers or other visible signs of damage – in the past many people with IBS were told the symptoms were "all in their head". But researchers now believe that many symptoms of IBS may be due to hypersensitivity of the nerves in the wall of the GI tract.

"Sometimes the brain-gut signal can get hyperconnected, especially if we're very stressed," Dr Mathur explains. "That can make those signals work more quickly, causing more abdominal pain and diarrhoea. And sometimes the signal is not that great, causing constipation and changes in motility." IBS can also be triggered by a change in the gut microbiome, possibly caused by an infection, use of an antibiotic, or even inflammation elsewhere in the body, Dr Mathur adds.

## There are three basic types of IBS:

► **IBS-D:** D is for "diarrhoea" – more than a quarter of someone's poo is loose or watery on days when they have abnormal bowel movements.

► **IBS-C:** C is for "constipation" – more than a quarter of someone's poo is hard or lumpy on days when they have at least one abnormal bowel movement.

► **IBS-M:** M is for "mixed"; more than a quarter of someone's poo is diarrhoea and more than a quarter is hard or lumpy on days when they have at least one abnormal bowel movement.

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## WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE IBS

It's crucial to get evaluated by a gastroenterologist and to be completely open about your symptoms – remember, these doctors talk about poo all day long. In addition to doing a physical exam and discussing your symptoms, your doctor might give you a blood test, take stool samples and schedule X-rays to help rule out other diseases that can mimic IBS.

“We have no cure for irritable bowel syndrome,” explains Dr Peters, “so what it becomes about is trying to best manage symptoms.” She believes patients get the most effective results with a multi-disciplinary approach.

“That means pharmaceutical-based options, dietary-based intervention and also psychological options,” she says.

In many cases, IBS is mild enough to be managed through lifestyle changes such as paying attention to which foods trigger symptoms, skipping carbonated beverages and gassy foods, or trying a low-FODMAP diet. In severe cases, a doctor may prescribe medications to treat your symptoms.

Being physically active is helpful for gut motility and mood, and because stress can trigger symptoms, gut hypnotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness and meditation can improve symptoms.

“There’s no doubt that your psychological state affects your physical health and your physical health impacts your psychological state. You need to be able address both ends to get the best outcome,” says Dr Peters.

### Easy does it

*Dietary supplements are intended to supplement the diet. They are not medicines and are not intended to treat, diagnose, mitigate, prevent, or cure diseases. Be cautious about taking dietary supplements if pregnant or breastfeeding. Also, be careful about giving supplements to a child, unless they are recommended by their healthcare provider.*

## And have you heard about...?

### IBD

Often confused with IBS, IBD (inflammatory bowel disease) includes two conditions characterised by chronic inflammation of the GI tract: Crohn’s disease (which can affect any part of the GI tract but usually the portion of the small intestine above the colon) and ulcerative colitis (this involves inflammation and sores along the lining of the colon and the rectum).

► **Symptoms:** Persistent diarrhoea, abdominal pain, bloody stool, weight loss, fatigue.

► **Treatments:**

Medications to reduce inflammation or suppress the immune response; in some cases, surgery to remove damaged tissue may be recommended.

### Coeliac disease

With this autoimmune disease, the body reacts to the ingestion of gluten (the protein in wheat, barley and rye) by attacking the lining of the small intestine. This can prevent the body from absorbing crucial vitamins and minerals; if left untreated, it

can increase the risk of type 1 diabetes, heart disease and osteoporosis.

► **Symptoms:**

Diarrhoea, weight loss, constipation, fatigue, headaches.

► **Treatments:**

Following a strict gluten-free diet.

### GERD

Short for gastroesophageal reflux disease, GERD happens when the acid from your stomach flows back up through your GI tract to your oesophagus and throat, causing a burning, acidic

feeling and heartburn. Unlike acid reflux, which can happen occasionally, GERD is a chronic condition that can occur when the sphincter in your oesophagus responsible for keeping acids down is weakened. Other risk factors of this disease include pregnancy, smoking and being overweight.

► **Symptoms:** A sour taste in the mouth, coughing, burning, chest pain, nausea.

► **Treatments:** Proton pump inhibitors or histamine blockers to reduce the production of stomach acid. ►