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Wolters Kluwer

# Patient education: Irritable bowel syndrome (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is irritable bowel syndrome?

Irritable bowel syndrome ("IBS") is a chronic condition that causes belly pain and problems with bowel movements. "Chronic" means that it is long term and needs to be managed throughout a person's life.

Some people with IBS have frequent, watery bowel movements (diarrhea). Others do not have enough bowel movements (constipation). Some people go back and forth between diarrhea and constipation.

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## What are the symptoms of IBS?

Symptoms include:

- Stomach pain and cramps, related to a bowel movement
- Diarrhea, constipation, or both
- Bloating
- Gas

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## 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 that 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:

- 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.
- Avoid foods that might make your IBS worse. Start by avoiding foods that give you gas. Then, you can try giving 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 your symptoms worse, cut back on the fiber.)
- Get regular physical activity. Try to do something active for 20 to 60 minutes, at least 3 to 5 days a week. Studies show this helps improve IBS symptoms. Even gentle forms of movement, like walking, can help.

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## How is IBS treated?

IBS cannot be cured. But there are medicines that can help relieve IBS symptoms, including:

- 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.

Stress can make IBS symptoms worse. Some people find that it helps to talk with a counselor or find other ways to relax and manage stress.

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## 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. Keep working with your doctor or nurse until you find an approach that works.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Constipation in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Diarrhea in adolescents and adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Irritable bowel syndrome \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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**This topic retrieved from UpToDate on:** Jun 22, 2023.

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Topic 15457 Version 8.0

