



Irritable Bowel Syndrome Awareness Month

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a disorder characterized by abdominal pain or discomfort, and altered bowel habit (chronic or recurrent diarrhea, constipation, or both – either mixed or in alternation).

IBS affects between 25 and 45 million people in the United States (10 to 15% of the population). Approximately 60 to 65% of IBS sufferers are female. IBS affects people of all ages, even children. The exact cause of IBS is unknown. Symptoms appear to result from a disturbance in the interaction between the gut, brain, and nervous system that alters regulation of bowel motor or sensory function. IBS is not caused by stress. However, because of the connection between the brain and the gut, symptoms can be exacerbated or triggered by stress.

The impact of IBS can range from mild inconvenience to severe debilitation, controlling many aspects of one's emotional, social and professional life. Those with moderate to severe cases, affecting an estimated 10 to 15 million people, must struggle to overcome symptoms that often impair their physical, emotional, economic, educational and social well-being. IBS is unpredictable. Although IBS is very common in the general population, few seek medical care for their symptoms even though treatments are available for IBS to help manage symptoms. Working with a physician or care-provider can help achieve the best possible results. Once a diagnosis is made it is helpful to develop a treatment plan and an outcome goal in an effort to control symptoms.

All treatment of IBS should begin with education about the nature of the disorder:

- It is a chronic condition with intermittent and variable symptoms
- Symptoms themselves are not life threatening nor an indication of something more serious
- Symptoms can often be managed with changes to a healthier lifestyle, or dietary changes such as modifying consumption of foods that seem to influence symptoms

For moderate symptoms, in addition to the above, consider...

- Use of a diary to help identify factors that aggravate, bring on, or "trigger" symptoms
- Investigating and learning stress management, relaxation, or pain management techniques
- Consulting with your physician about the use of drug therapy, which will depend on your predominant symptom.

Use of medications requires a careful evaluation of the nature and severity of symptoms, exclusion of other disorders, and a determination of which medication is best suited to you

If symptoms are severe, in addition to all of the above, consider...

- Investigating the use and benefits offered by cognitive-behavioral therapy
- Drug therapy, in consultation with your physician, for treatment of pain
- Seeking referral to a pain treatment center

To learn more about IBS or other digestive disorders visit www.aboutibs.org.