

HCF

Health Report

SPECIAL REPORT

NO. 11

irritable bowel
syndrome



irritable bowel syndrome

One in seven Australians has irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Around one in 10 visits to GPs and half the visits to gastro-enterologists are to do with IBS. Only the common cold accounts for more lost workdays. However, even though it's so common, IBS continues to frustrate those trying to discover its causes and ideal treatment.

WHAT IS IBS?

The most common symptoms of IBS include abdominal discomfort or pain and bloating, together with constipation, diarrhoea or alternating bouts of both. Twice as many women as men develop IBS, and the most usual age of onset is around 20. It affects people quite differently, with some having attacks that last days, weeks or even months and others dealing with recurrent episodes all their lives.

IBS is described as a functional gastro-intestinal disorder, with no structural or biochemical abnormality being present to explain the symptoms. Physical examination is typically, and frustratingly, normal for people with IBS, enlightening only in its ability to rule out other more serious illnesses such as colon cancer or inflammatory

bowel disease. "It appears to be due to increased sensitivity in the bowel, coupled with abnormal bowel contractions, called peristalsis," says Sydney gastroenterologist Dr Katie Ellard.

IS IT IBS OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Only about 20 per cent of people with symptoms of IBS go to the doctor about it. As distressing as it can be, IBS should not be confused with more serious bowel conditions, and does not cause them. However, notice should be taken of a few warning signs.

"Rectal bleeding and weight loss are not symptoms of IBS and should therefore be further investigated," says Professor Terry Bolin of the Gut Foundation at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital. Fever and pain during the night should also be looked into, and if you have a family history of

either bowel cancer or coeliac disease, you shouldn't assume your symptoms are due to IBS.

While it can occur in the elderly, IBS is more common in younger people. "Anyone developing symptoms over the age of 40 should see their doctor, so that other conditions with perhaps more serious consequences, like bowel cancer, can be ruled out," says Professor Bolin. If you're at all worried about your symptoms, that's a good enough reason in itself to go to the doctor.

Before making a diagnosis of IBS, the doctor will probably want to rule out other bowel conditions, including:

- ■ Colon cancer. This is the most common type of internal cancer in Australia. Bowel cancer is uncommon before the age of 40 but its incidence increases after that. Prospects of a cure are much better than most cancers but early diagnosis is vital. One in 18 men and one in 16 women develop bowel cancer.

- ■ Inflammatory bowel disease. This includes Crohn's disease, which may cause inflammation of any part of the gastro-intestinal

CASE STUDY

Jenny, 25, dates her IBS back to a bout of food poisoning she had when she was 19. "It seemed to clear up, but then every now and then I'd get terrible stomach pains and constipation. I eventually went to the doctor and he gave me a laxative.

"This went on, and I tried another doctor, who put me on various laxatives but the problem never really went away.

"At times it's so difficult to live with IBS - it feels as if it's taking over my life. I can't plan anything in advance because I don't know how I'll be feeling. One of the worst nights of my life was my 21st birthday - friends had organised a party and I was stuck in the bathroom for hours feeling absolutely dreadful.

"It's hard to explain what it feels like to live with IBS. I've tried quite a few different medications and complementary therapies, and sometimes they work for a while, but it keeps coming back.

"I am hopeful that, in the future, things might be better."



PHOTO GETTY IMAGES

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tract, and ulcerative colitis, which involves inflammation and ulceration of the rectum and colon.

■ ■ Coeliac disease. This is caused by an intolerance to gluten, a protein found in various grains. This also causes destruction of

the lining of the bowel, and the resultant poor absorption of fats and other nutrients may cause symptoms similar to those of IBS. Coeliac disease can be treated by avoiding all foods containing gluten. It is diagnosed with a small bowel biopsy, although blood tests are helpful.

■ ■ Lactose intolerance. The inability to digest the sugar in milk (lactose) can produce similar symptoms to IBS.

WHAT CAUSES IBS?

It's often difficult to pinpoint

a cause of IBS, although it's likely that one or more factors contribute to each individual's condition.

Diet

Diet is often implicated in IBS, but its exact role is in question. A habit of skipping breakfast is often

A high fibre diet with a wide variety of foods is recommended

Infection

About a quarter of people with IBS report that their symptoms started after a bowel infection. "It can be any kind of viral or bacterial gastroenteritis," says Professor Bolin. "You don't have to acquire it in Bali, it could be something you pick up in Sydney." Unfortunately, problems can persist for months or years after the infection itself has cleared up.

Antibiotics

A reaction to medications such as antibiotics can be a factor in some cases of IBS. "It functions, we think, in the same way as an infection, damaging the nerves that line the colon, making them more sensitive," says Professor Bolin.

Other causes

"If a patient has not had any recent infection or taken antibiotics, it can be difficult to establish a cause for the symptoms, and that can be frustrating," says Dr Ellard. "You need to take a careful medical history and look at various lifestyle factors and rule out any other possibly important causes of the symptoms."

noted in patients, and symptoms are often worse following a meal. Some experts believe that certain types of food appear to be more troublesome. "Fat, alcohol, coffee and spices will make symptoms worse for some people," says Professor Bolin. Others believe that food itself can be a general trigger, and the type of food doesn't seem to have much of an impact.

A high fibre diet including a wide range of food is what experts recommend to protect against many bowel conditions, although some forms of fibre, particularly those in fruit, can aggravate IBS symptoms in some cases. "However, you should try to have a balanced diet for a few months before deciding it doesn't help," says Dr Ellard.

Stress

Stress is often nominated as a contributing factor to IBS, with more than half the patients identifying a relationship between stress and symptoms. Stress may seem to trigger episodes of IBS, but it's unlikely to be a cause of the condition.

While a number of American studies have suggested that a

history of sexual abuse is present in up to 30 percent of IBS, the significance of such findings is not clear. "In the time I've been treating IBS, I've found very little evidence to support such a contention," says Dr Ellard. "However, if patients have had experiences that continue to cause

distress, they need to discuss this with their GP."

Hormonal changes in women

No-one knows why more women than men experience IBS. It has often been attributed to hormonal changes, particularly around the time of menstruation, but these assertions are controversial. "Some women with IBS do notice their symptoms get worse either before or during their periods," says Dr Ellard. "But there's no obvious association suggesting hormonal causes of IBS, and clearly, many men get IBS too."

IBS TREATMENT

There is no recognised cure for IBS, and treatment is very much an individual thing, based on identifying the probable contributing factors.

A change of diet may help. "You have to sit down and find out what works for each patient," says Dr Ellard. "You can't just tell them to have more fibre, for instance, because that's not necessarily the answer for everyone. Some people get more bloated after eating fibre."

Professor Bolin suggests that those people "might be better off using a bulking agent such as Agiofibe or Metamucil".

To see if IBS is affected by diet or stress, it may be helpful to keep a diary to see if any patterns emerge. If there's a relationship between stress

CASE STUDY

Stuart, 39, was diagnosed with IBS when he was 34. "I'd had symptoms for a while before then, but it was only when I had persistent diarrhoea that I started to get really worried," he says. "It definitely affected my life - the first thing I'd do when I got anywhere was check out where the bathrooms were. I'd always try to get the table nearest the bathroom at restaurants and make sure I could make a quick getaway. It got pretty stressful at times.

"I've made heaps of changes to my diet - cut out fried foods, spicy food and coffee. That's all made a big difference. I always have diarrhoea tablets in my pocket - I won't leave home without them. Just having them there makes me feel more relaxed. It can all get to be a bit of a vicious circle otherwise, as I am sure stress makes the problem worse.

"I'm so much better than I was a couple of years ago; now I only seem to get the symptoms every few months. I really feel as if I am just about over it."

and symptoms, stress management strategies may need to be adopted.

Medication

Anti-spasmodic medications are available to treat the abdominal pain of IBS, but there is little scientific evidence for their effectiveness. However, Dr Ellard believes they have a place as part of an overall strategy. Low-dose anti-depressants may also be used to block the transmission of pain from the gut to the brain. "These are particularly useful for people who have a lot of pain," she says.

"Zelmac (Tegaserod) is a new treatment for people with constipation-predominant IBS. It's not available on the PBS, so unfortunately it is expensive."

Alternative medicine

"Naturopaths are often as good at treating IBS as we are," says Dr Ellard. "We often end up using the same approach."

Says Professor Bolin: "There is also some work that suggests that acupuncture may be of value. A range of alternative therapies haven't been evaluated – the use of slippery elm, peppermint oil or aloe vera, for instance. If you try them and they work, that's fine."

Laxatives

Laxatives may help constipation predominant IBS, but Dr Ellard says that fibre supplements such as Normacol should be tried

first. Osmotic laxatives, which draw water into the bowel are preferable to stimulant laxatives such as senna and cascara which can cause problems with bowel function if taken for long periods. Epsom salts are another safe, cheap option.

Finding the best treatment for IBS can be trial and error. "You can usually get a little, and sometimes a lot, better by looking at your diet, exercise and the amount of fluids you drink," says Dr Ellard. "You may need to use various treatments too. The best thing is to keep trying and you can almost certainly get some benefit."

IBS Quick Tips

- ■ Heat may relieve abdominal pain. Try a heating pad, a hot water bottle or a warm bath.
- ■ Eat smaller, more frequent meals, which may be easier to tolerate than larger ones.
- ■ Schedule meals for a time when you can sit down and relax.
- ■ Reduce or eliminate caffeine, alcohol and smoking.
- ■ Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing.
- ■ Respond to the need to go to the bathroom.
- ■ Avoid straining during bowel movements.
- ■ Exercise before eating to stimulate bowel movements.
- ■ Use stress-relieving techniques that work in other areas of your life.
- ■ Drink lots of water.

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directory of health services

Alcohol & Drug Information Services

Australian Drug Foundation	(03) 9278 8100
Alcoholics Anonymous	
Sydney	(02) 9799 1199
Canberra	(02) 6249 1340
Melbourne	(03) 9429 1833
Adelaide	(08) 8346 4044
Hobart	(03) 6234 8711
Brisbane	(07) 3857 0160
Perth	(08) 9325 3566

Alzheimer's Association

Helpline	Freecall 1800 639 331
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Arthritis Foundation

ACT	(02) 6257 4842
NSW	(02) 9281 1611
Queensland	(07) 3831 4255
South Australia	(08) 8379 5711
Tasmania	(03) 6234 6489
Victoria	(03) 9530 0255
Western Australia	(08) 9388 2199

Asthma Foundation

NSW	(02) 9906 3233
Queensland	(07) 3252 7677
South Australia	(08) 8362 6272
Tasmania	(03) 6223 7725
Victoria	(03) 9326 7088
Western Australia	(08) 9481 1234

Australian Cancer Society

ACT Cancer Society	(02) 6262 2222
NSW Cancer Council	(02) 9334 1900 or 131 120
Cancer Council of NT	(08) 8927 4888
QLD Cancer Fund	(07) 3258 2200
Anti-Cancer Foundation of SA	(08) 8291 4111
Cancer Council of Tasmania	(03) 6233 2030
Anti-Cancer Council of Victoria	(03) 9279 1111
Cancer Foundation of WA	(08) 9381 4515

Diabetes Australia

ACT	(02) 6288 9830
NSW	(02) 9552 9900
Northern Territory	(08) 8927 8488
Queensland	(07) 3846 4600
South Australia	(08) 8234 1977
Tasmania	(03) 6234 5223
Victoria	(03) 9654 8777
Western Australia	(08) 9325 7699

Juvenile Diabetes Foundation of Australia

ACT	(02) 6230 8225
NSW	(02) 9966 0400
Queensland	(07) 3227 1475
South Australia	(08) 8201 7666
Victoria	(03) 9696 3866
Western Australia	(08) 9426 2111

Domestic Violence Assistance

National 24-hour line	1800 811 811
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Irritable Bowel Information and Support Association of Australia

Queensland	(07) 3904 8006
Toll Free (Australia Only)	1300 651 131

National Association for Loss and Grief

NSW	(02) 9988 3376
Queensland	(07) 3822 2633
South Australia	(08) 8294 7811
Victoria	(03) 9331 3555
Western Australia	(08) 9321 3553
ACT	(02) 6239 7011

National Heart Foundation

ACT (National Office)	(02) 6282 5744
Sydney	(02) 9219 2444
Newcastle	(02) 4952 4699
Northern Territory	(08) 8981 1966
Brisbane	(07) 3854 1696
Cairns	(07) 4031 5544
Gold Coast	(07) 5592 3039
Rockhampton	(07) 4922 2195
Toowoomba	(07) 4632 3672
Townsville	(07) 4721 4686
South Australia	(08) 8223 3144
Tasmania	(03) 6224 2722
Victoria	(03) 9329 8511
Western Australia	(08) 9388 3343

Poisons Information Centre

131 126

Relations Australia

NSW	(02) 9418 8800
Queensland	(07) 3217 2900
South Australia	(08) 8223 4566
Western Australia	(08) 9470 5108

St John Ambulance Australia

ACT (National Headquarters)	(02) 6295 3777
NSW	(02) 9212 1088
Northern Territory	(08) 8922 6200
Queensland	(07) 3252 3450
South Australia	(08) 8274 0465
Tasmania	(03) 6223 7177
Victoria	(03) 9696 0000
Western Australia	(08) 9334 1222

Sudden Infant Death Association

24-hour help line	
Sydney	(02) 9360 0099
Outside Sydney	1800 651 186