

Irritable Bowel Syndrome and diet

Step 1: Understanding the relationship between irritable bowel syndrome and diet

You suffer from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Does your diet have anything to do with it?

Although no cause has been identified, the following may bring on some of the symptoms (the dietary links are indicated in bold):

- Stress, anxiety and depression
- Smoking
- **Food sensitivity, especially as people age**
- **Overeating, binge eating, eating irregularly or too quickly**
- **Too much fat in the diet**
- **Lactose intolerance**
- **Sugar substitutes such as sorbitol and aspartame**
- Certain antibiotics that alter the population of bacteria in the intestines
- Morphine and codeine
- Aluminium salts of antacids
- The prescription drug methotrexate
- Tricyclic antidepressants
- Certain antihistamines, mineral supplements, diuretics, antipsychotics and sedatives
- Sensitivity to intestinal sensations (visceral hyperalgesia)
- Hormonal changes, for example during the menstrual cycle

Step 2: Adopting new healthy habits:

- Make sure that there is enough fibre in your diet – about 30g daily.
- Do not smoke.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine, for example in coffee, colas and chocolate.
- Get regular exercise to help regulate bowel movements.
- Participate in healthy activities to reduce stress.

Step 3: Understanding the basic principles of a diet to reduce symptoms of IBS

Certain foods may contribute to a spastic colon by irritating your gastrointestinal tract.

Your health professional will help you to assess the quality of your diet and then recommend a balanced nutritional programme.

You may be told to cut your consumption of dietary fat, whether it is vegetable oil or animal fat, saturated or unsaturated. Other known irritants are eggs and dairy products, spicy foods and coffee. An elimination diet may help you discover food sensitivities. Do not eat a suspected food for 10 to 30 days. Then try it again and if you get an adverse reaction, avoid that food in future. It may be a good idea to keep a diet diary to determine if a particular food makes your symptoms worse.

Increase your water intake if you take supplementary fibre. At first the amount of intestinal gas may increase, but it should subside as your body adjusts.

Your doctor may also recommend that you eat smaller meals more often or eat smaller portions of foods during meals.

Do not drink alcohol.

Start eating additional dietary fibre in small quantities and increase your intake every few days. Don't start off by eating cups of bran or legumes, as this may cause other digestive upsets. Let your system get used to one tablespoon of bran a day and when you are comfortable with this, increase your intake gradually.

Foods rich in dietary fibre are:

- wholewheat or brown bread, minimally processed cereals, such as brown rice, unsifted maize meal, sorghum porridge (Maltabella), bran-rich breakfast cereals and products like muffins made with bran cereal and/or wheat bran (obtainable from your local health shop)
- raw, unpeeled fruit and vegetables, or lightly cooked vegetables, jackets potatoes, fresh, fruit juices, and dried fruit soaked and/or boiled with honey
- legumes, such as dry beans, peas and lentils, and products made from legumes or soya (Toppers, textured vegetable protein, tofu, tempe)
- commercial high-fibre products which can be obtained from your chemist or health shop, such as Fybogel

Always remember to drink four to five glasses of water in addition to your normal fluid intake. Water helps dietary fibre to swell and provide bulk in the intestines, thus improving regularity. However, overdoing water intake is also not a good idea and can lead to problems, including low calcium, magnesium and potassium levels. So drink some additional water, but don't overdo things.

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