Controlling irritable bowel syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a disorder of the intestines that causes abdominal pain and cramping as well as diarrhea, constipation, or both. Patients with this condition also often complain that they pass a lot of gas and belch frequently. However, people with IBS usually do not have more gas than others. Rather, their intestines may be more stimulated by normal amounts of gas, which do not cause problems in healthy people.

There is no cure for IBS, but it is not life-threatening and it does not increase the chance of other intestinal disorders or cancer. Yet IBS can be frustrating because its symptoms can come and go throughout life. You can help keep symptoms under control, in part, by modifying your diet.

What to eat

Your doctor may ask you to eat more fiber. This will help keep stools soft but formed, and more comfortable to pass. You can increase fiber intake by eating whole-grain breads and cereals, unprocessed bran cereal, fruits, and vegetables (note "What to avoid").

Or, you can take a bulk-forming supplement such as psyllium (Fiberall, Konsyl-D, Metamucil), polycarbophil (Equalactin, FiberCon, Mitrolan), or methylcellulose (Citrucel). Some of these supplements are available in different forms, including tablets, powders that you mix with water or juice, and wafers.

No matter which fiber-rich foods you eat or supplements you use, drink 6 to 8 cups of fluid every day for best results.

What to limit

If diarrhea is your main symptom, your doctor may have you limit the amount of milk and cheese you eat for a few weeks to see if you have a condition called lactose intolerance. People with this condition cannot properly digest dairy foods. Lactose intolerance causes diarrhea and gas—which can seem to be IBS or worsen actual IBS.

Because dairy products are a major source of calcium, you will need to take extra steps to ensure you meet the recommended daily allowance (1,000 mg per day for men and 1,500 mg per day for women). You can do this by taking a calcium supplement or eating calcium-rich foods such as leafy green vegetables and sardines.

What to avoid

- Foods that increase intestinal gas: beans, cabbage, onions, celery, carrots, raisins, apricots, prunes, Brussels sprouts, wheat germ, pretzels, and bagels.
- Caffeine, which is found in coffee, tea, and many sodas. Caffeine can cause watery stools.
- Large meals, which can cause cramping and diarrhea in people with IBS. Try eating small meals frequently throughout the day.

Keep track of what you eat

Your doctor may ask you to write down everything you eat, to help find out if certain foods trigger or worsen your symptoms. Tell your doctor what you find. Your doctor may suggest that you meet with a registered dietitian to help you make any necessary dietary changes safely, without losing vitamins and minerals your body needs.

Be sure to make changes gradually—especially when increasing your fiber intake—so that your body has a chance to adapt. Otherwise, your symptoms may get worse before they get better.

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