



Have you been experiencing abdominal discomfort or pain, bloating, frequent constipation or diarrhoea? These could be signs of a functional gastrointestinal (GI) disorder known as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Read on to find out more.

#### What Is Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

IBS is a disorder that interferes with the normal functions of the large intestine (colon). A common functional gastrointestinal disorder, IBS symptoms are associated with the colon and include abdominal pain and bloating, as well as disturbances in defecation.

#### How Common Is IBS In Singapore?

About 10% of Singaporeans, both young and old, suffer from IBS.

#### How Will I Know If I Have IBS?

There is no specific test to diagnose for IBS; diagnostic tests are usually done to exclude other diseases and conditions. The doctor will be able to confirm if you are suffering from IBS based on the results of these tests and a detailed physical examination.

#### What Are The Causes Of IBS?

Studies have not determined a single organic cause of IBS. Its conditions are not caused by infection, inflammation or blockage. Evaluation with x-rays, endoscopy and blood tests usually fail to show any abnormality. However, symptoms can result from the following:

- Disturbances of the normal activities and functions of the digestive tract

A disturbance in normal motility and peristalsis (the contraction of the colon muscles and the movement of its contents) causes symptoms such as cramping abdominal pain, diarrhoea, constipation, and relief of pain with the passage of loose bowel movements.

- Increased sensitivity to what is happening in the gut and abdomen

Many people with IBS have enhanced sensation and perception of bowel function. They can feel things in their GI tract, chest, abdomen and rectum that people without IBS cannot. A sensitive GI tract can have a hyper-reaction to things that activate or trigger pain and symptoms.

#### Function Of The Colon

The colon connects the small intestines with the rectum and anus. Its function is to absorb water that was used in the digestion process and some of the substances that were used in digestion. Unabsorbed food residue is then excreted as waste by the anus.

# Coping With Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

- Problems related to the Brain-Gut Connection

The Mind-Body/Brain-Gut Connection is the key to understanding these disorders and to the healing process. There is a powerful connection between the mind and the body/gut. Gut sensations reach the brain through the circuitry of nerves in the wall of the intestine, then to the spinal cord, and finally the brain. Transmission is bi-directional and similar to a 'two-way street'. Thus, the gut affects the brain and the brain affects the gut.

#### The Brain-Gut Connection

##### Stress

Psychological stress or emotional responses to life stress can influence GI function in anyone through the Brain-Gut Connection and produce GI symptoms such as pain and altered bowel function. But patients with a functional GI disorder (such as IBS) are more likely to experience more severe and frequent symptoms.

##### Psychological disorders

Studies now show that patients with IBS and other functional GI disorders who seek medical attention for these symptoms are



more likely to have psychological problems than those with symptoms but do not consult a doctor about them. This means that psychological disorders such as anxiety, panic, depression, somatoform disorders (unexplained bodily symptoms), a history of abuse (mental, emotional, physical or sexual), alcohol or substance abuse or eating disorders can lead to increased symptoms and illness and reduce the person's ability to cope. Psychological problems are not the cause of functional disorders. Instead, such problems increase the need to consult doctors which leads to more tests and surgery that could be unnecessary.

#### How Can I Relieve The Symptoms?

Each person's therapy is tailored to their symptoms and may include one or more of the following - lifestyle changes, pharmacological treatment and psychological treatment. Therefore, there is really no one 'good' general treatment for IBS.

#### Do I Need To Modify My Diet?

In some cases, certain foods can aggravate IBS symptoms and should be avoided, in particular, lactose (for lactose-intolerant people), gas-producing vegetables (such as beans and broccoli), fatty foods and alcohol. While these foods can exacerbate IBS symptoms, it is important to note that they are not the sole cause of typical IBS symptoms. To determine which foods trigger which symptoms, one often needs to start with a very basic bland diet and gradually add one new food each day and record any symptoms associated with that particular food.

#### Treatment For IBS

Although no confirmed cure has been found at present, many options are available to treat the symptoms:

- Anti-spasmodic drugs
- Antacids/anti-gas medication aids in the reduction of embarrassing flatulence and accompanying lower abdominal pain.
- Anti-diarrhoea medication helps in delaying small and large bowel transit. Some studies have shown improvements in diarrhoea, rectal urgency and abdominal pain in IBS.
- Prokinetic agents treat GI symptoms by restoring normal GI motility.
- Anti-depressants are often used in patients with associated depression; symptoms appear to improve (independent of their anti-depressive effects).

#### What Are Some Of The Psychological Treatments Available ?

Psychological treatments such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, biofeedback therapy, relaxation therapy and hypnotherapy should be considered when symptoms are severe and are associated with psychological distress.

#### Is IBS Linked To Other Diseases?

Although IBS causes discomfort and pain, it does not cause permanent damage or harm to the intestines. Neither does IBS lead to more serious conditions such as cancer or intestinal bleeding.

## Possible New Cure For IBS?

Recent research findings by a team from NUH and NUS seem to indicate that melatonin may be very helpful to IBS patients. According to researcher A/Prof Ho Khek Yu, Consultant Gastroenterologist at NUH, IBS patients when given even small amounts of melatonin\* experienced less diarrhoea and abdominal pain.

This is good news for patients as there is now hope for a cheap and easily available over-the-counter remedy for their abdominal discomfort. In addition, the team's findings indicate that there is link between the brain and the bowels, a commonly held hypothesis in the scientific world.

\*Melatonin is a substance produced by the pineal gland in the brain which makes us sleep.

