



SPECIALIST SURGEONS

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Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable Bowel Syndrome is a very common condition which causes cramp or spasm of the intestine. It accounts for more than half of all gastrointestinal illnesses.

Because it affects so many people, it is important to understand the nature of this condition particularly since we should not confuse it with more serious conditions of the intestines such as Ulcerative Colitis and Cancer. It does **not** cause either.

This pamphlet is intended to help many sufferers from irritable bowel to understand and obtain relief from this troublesome complaint.

What is irritable bowel?

Your intestines are like a muscular tube and for a variety of reasons can sometimes contract too tightly. This is similar to sportsmen getting cramp in the leg and is of course uncomfortable. It can occur at any age, but often begins in early adult life or even in adolescence.

What are the common symptoms?

Abdominal pain is the commonest symptom. The pain is often relieved by passing wind or by bowel action. Occasionally bowel movement may bring on pain.

Abdominal bloating, particularly after meals.

Diarrhoea may occur, usually in the morning.

Constipation. This is the commonest change, but it may alternate with diarrhoea or normal stools. The stools are often small and "pellet like", and are passed only with straining.

Mucous is often noted in the stools.

A sense of incomplete evacuation is sometimes present.

What are the less common symptoms?

Loss of appetite.
Nausea.
Belching.
Occasional vomiting.
Headache, sweating, flushing and faintness.

What is the usual pattern of symptoms?

It varies greatly according to the individual. Each person does seem to follow their own pattern. Symptoms may last for a number of days, weeks or even months, according to the regular pattern of that person. Although one particular symptom may dominate others, diarrhoea and constipation frequently alternate. The pain varies from mild to severe and occurs at irregular intervals.

How is irritable bowel related to stress?

Stress is a normal part of life. A little stress makes people concentrate and get more out of life. Too much stress and your body reacts badly. Some people get headaches or have breathing problems, some have stomach upsets. Changing jobs, moving house, trouble with friends or family, all cause stress. There is a constant feeling of anxiety and this may cause a flare-up of your irritable bowel symptoms. The trouble is, you then have the symptoms to worry about, so there is a vicious circle.

How can you deal with stress?

Learn to relax. You can't avoid stress but you can help your body. One of the best techniques is to set aside a few minutes each day to do relaxation exercises. Tense different muscles for a few seconds then relax them. When you are tense do breathing exercises by inhaling as deeply as you can and then slowly breathing out. Regular aerobic exercise such as jogging, cycling or swimming also promotes good health and imparts a sense of wellbeing. When you are fully relaxed your heart rate and breathing will slow down. There are several books dealing with relaxation, biofeedback, and living with stress and stress related illnesses.

What about diet?

The importance of diet varies from person to person. Your doctor will advise you if he wants you to take special measures. Patients with irritable bowel and constipation generally benefit from an increased intake of fibre. Such an increase must be introduced slowly, so that your body can adapt to it. Many people are able to eat a normal diet. Milk containing foods are sometimes the cause of abdominal cramp, bloating and diarrhoea.

You may be asked to undergo a Hydrogen Breath test to diagnose this condition. People with flatulence and bloating often benefit from avoiding leafy or gas forming foods.

Will my condition turn to cancer if neglected?

NO. There is absolutely no relationship between cancer and irritable bowel.

What about the pain?

Your doctor may give treatment for the spasm affecting your bowel. Such medication is safe and reliable, but it's important that you take it exactly as prescribed. Avoid taking any medicines not recommended by your doctor. Local heat like a hot water bottle or hot pad on the tummy can also help to relieve the pain.