Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Irritable Bowel Syndrome is one of a number of functional disorders of the digestive system. 'Functional' means that there are no structural or tissue abnormalities that explain the symptoms, and that while symptoms can be very distressing, they do not signal a disease state such as ulcer, inflammatory bowel disease or cancer. While some foods may worsen the symptoms, the problem is not caused by food.

There are no tests that confirm the diagnosis. Sometimes tests are done to rule out disease, for example endoscopy, colonoscopy/sigmoidoscopy, ultrasound, blood tests for celiac disease, stool tests for parasites or bacteria, the breath test for Helicobacter pylori.

The digestive system requires highly coordinated contractions from the esophagus to the rectum to function optimally. Functional disorders of the gut occur when the intestine squeezes too hard or not hard enough; pain can result from material passing too slowly in one area and too quickly in another, or a prolonged contraction might trigger pain and bloating by preventing the normal passage of gas. Functional gut disorders are very common, affecting infants (eg colic), children (constipation, recurrent abdominal pain), adolescents and adults (IBS, dyspepsia, nausea/vomiting, gall bladder, constipation, anorectal syndromes). IBS alone affects about 20% of Canadians.

The gut has its own nervous system to regulate its functions; that system interacts with the central nervous system (CNS). While we don't know the cause of these gut disorders, and everyone has cramping, bloating, constipation or diarrhea, those with more severe and prolonged functional gut symptoms tend to have more intense general digestive reactions , increased gut reactions to stress hormones such as adrenaline, and to female hormones, which may explain the higher rate of IBS in women.

Typical symptoms include abdominal pain (sharp or diffuse), bloating, and altered bowel movements (constipation, diarrhea or alternating). Symptoms are usually associated with change in bowel habits and are relieved by a bowel movement. Other symptoms include rabbit pellet or ribbon stools, slime (mucous), a feeling of incomplete emptying, indigestion, nausea, dizziness, headaches and sweating.

Red flags: unintentional weight loss, blood in the stool, fever, and severe pain that wakens you from sleep **are not IBS**.

Management: Note that IBS symptoms wax and wane and often resolve spontaneously.

Food:

- Cooking vegetables and avoiding fruit skins may help. Cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower may increase gas*. 'Beano' may decrease gas from beans.
- Dairy products only cause problems if there is also lactose intolerance.
- Alcohol, fatty or spicy foods and caffeine can all be aggravating.
- Fibre plays an important role in a healthy diet, but neither soluble nor insoluble fibre improved IBS symptoms in several studies. Insoluble fibre is laxative and may aggravate diarrhea (e.g. whole wheat and wheat bran, brown rice, vegetables); soluble fibre (oat and oat bran, lentils, apple, pear, flaxseed, psyllium) may help.
- Mannitol, xylitol and sorbitol can cause gas and diarrhea if taken in large quantities.
- A low fodmap diet may help: http://www.ibsgroup.org/brochures/fodmap-intolerances.pdf

*Swallowed air is the major source of intestinal gas. Reduce by avoiding chewing gum, washing food down with fluids, and gulping food.

Medication:

- Antispasmodics such as hyoscine (Buscopan), pinaverium (Dicetel), dicyclomine (Bentylol), trimebutine (Modulon), and peppermint oil capsules (1-2 twice daily, enteric coated to prevent heartburn)) relieved symptoms for some.
- Antidepressants, in particular SSRI and TCA classes relieved symptoms for some.

Other:

- Probiotics: An emerging treatment but product claims for quantity of live bacteria may be exaggerated. Lactobacillus plantarum 299V has relieved symptoms. Saccharomyces boulardii lyo (a yeast) has improved the number and consistency of stools.
- Hypnosis, acupuncture, cognitive-behavioural therapy and interpersonal therapy have all demonstrated possible benefit.

More information: http://www.badgut.org/information-centre/irritable-bowel-syndrome.html

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