

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Colitis: Identification and Treatment

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a painful and sometimes crippling condition that causes abdominal pain, severe gas and problems with bowel movements.

What are Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Colitis?

For the majority of people afflicted with the disorder, an IBS attack means a sudden onset of stinging cramps and a bloated feeling in the stomach, along with gas and nausea. This is often accompanied by constipation or diarrhea, as well as the feeling that the bowels are not empty. The illness generally appears in people between the ages of 20 and 30, and is twice as likely to affect women as men.

About 70 per cent of those afflicted with IBS have symptoms that, while painful, are relatively mild and don't cause any lasting damage. Twenty-five per cent experience moderate IBS — cases with greater physical and psychological effects — and five per cent experience symptoms so severe that they are often unable to maintain normal lives.

Colitis, along with a similar disorder known as Crohn's disease, is a condition that occurs when the lining of the colon becomes inflamed, and frequently results in severe diarrhea and abdominal pain.

The differences between these illnesses can be confusing, and many people incorrectly use the two terms interchangeably. However, while being closely related, it's important to remember that Colitis, unlike IBS, causes physical damage to the colon.

Why Does IBS Happen?

After your stomach is finished digesting food, it passes whatever's left to the colon by sending contractions through your body. This means about six contractions a day, on average, for most people. However, those affected by IBS can experience up to 25 contractions a day, which causes diarrhea in sufferers. Conversely, an IBS sufferer can experience no contractions at all, resulting in constipation. Experts have also found that these contractions tend to be much more painful among IBS sufferers than the general population.

Scientists are still not completely sure what causes IBS, but one of the major culprits appears to be stress. Most people, when they are under pressure or are facing difficult personal problems, end up being plagued by stomach aches, nausea or bowel problems. That's because there's a strong link between the nervous system and digestion. For IBS sufferers, the symptoms are even worse and can result in a self-perpetuating cycle — the more they feel sick, the more stressed they become; they may even begin to anticipate feeling sick, which further exacerbates the situation.

How Do I Know if I Have Colitis or IBS?

Sufferers of IBS and Colitis tend to have the following symptoms:

- A feeling that you always need to use the washroom
- Sharp pains and stomach cramps
- A painful build-up of gas, particularly after eating certain foods

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- Rectal bleeding
- Loss of appetite and unexpected weight gain
- Chills
- Feelings of fatigue

If you think you might have IBS or Colitis, be sure to speak with your family doctor immediately.

How Can I Minimize IBS and Colitis Symptoms?

If you are suffering from IBS or Colitis, there are some personal prevention methods that you can try for lessening your symptoms, these include:

Watching what you eat. Certain foods, such as chocolate, caffeine-based products and alcohol, are major culprits. And if you've ever had to run to the bathroom after eating spicy or fatty foods, you can certainly understand how hard they are for the body to properly digest. Foods that are high in fiber are helpful in maintaining regularity. This includes whole grains, nuts, fruits, and certain vegetables like broccoli. Certain herbs also have a positive effect on digestion, particularly peppermint and ginger. Because everyone's body is different, many doctors recommend using a food diary to find out which foods are causing your troubling symptoms. This can assist you in creating a diet to prevent further outbreaks of the condition.

Learning to relax. Because stress is so closely connected to IBS, learning relaxation techniques is key in combating the problem. One of the best ways to achieve this is by taking up a relaxation technique, such as yoga, meditation or pilates. Alternatively, there are many simple relaxation exercises you can try, including deep breathing and imaging, to calm both your body and mind.

Using alternative medicine. Many sufferers have turned to complementary forms of medicine to help reduce stress, and prevent the chance of another outbreak. Some of the more well-known treatments are reflexology, biofeedback and hypnotherapy.

Attending Colitis and IBS support groups. If you have IBS or Colitis, an excellent way to stay positive is by joining one of the associations. These groups offer assistance as well as information, and can help sufferers feel like part of a community.

Medical Treatment for Colitis and IBS

Scientists have yet to find a cure for IBS and Colitis. However, there are a number of effective treatments that your doctor may recommend, including:

- **Medications.** In many cases, medication can provide effective treatment for people affected by Colitis. This can include drugs to treat the inflammation of the colon, or to help reduce the symptoms.

- **Surgery.** In some Colitis cases, when medications are not effective in preventing inflammation, all or part of the colon may need to be removed surgically. The type of surgery will depend on the severity of the case and on the lifestyle of the individual.

- **Psychotherapy and psychiatric medicines.** Stress and anxiety are often the triggers for IBS attacks, and health professionals will frequently treat sufferers with cognitive behavioral therapy or psychotherapy.

Despite medical advances regarding these conditions, most people never receive treatment. In fact, studies show that only one-quarter of IBS sufferers ever come forward for assistance. If you or someone you know is affected by one of these illnesses, it's important to remember you're not alone. Remember: The more willing you are to seek out help and support, the easier it will be to return to a more normal, healthy lifestyle.