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About Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Overview

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a disturbance of colon function characterized by abdominal discomfort, bloating, and abnormal bowel movements. It can have constipation dominance or diarrhea dominance or alternate between the two. "Irritable" means that the nerve endings in the lining of the bowel are unusually sensitive, and that the nerves that control the muscles of the gut are unusually active. The bowel is more or less responsive to what might be normal events such as passing gas or having a bowel movement.

Causes

The cause of IBS is not completely understood. People with IBS have altered patterns of colon muscle contraction. IBS is not directly caused by stress or anxiety, but symptoms are greatly aggravated by them.

Symptoms

- abdominal bloating and gas
- chronic diarrhea
- constipation
- alternating pattern of diarrhea and constipation
- pencil thin bowel movements
- sensation of not being able to empty bowels fully
- abdominal pain or spasms, which feels relieved after a bowel movement
- nausea

Anemia, bleeding, weight loss, and fever are **not** symptoms of IBS, and a physician should be contacted immediately if they occur.

Treatment

IBS should be diagnosed by your healthcare provider to ensure that other medical conditions are not causing your symptoms. You may be asked to keep a daily diary to help identify diet or situations that provoke IBS.

Proper rest, diet, and exercise can help reduce stress and positively influence IBS. Treatment is not usually associated with hospitalization or surgery. Your physician may also be able to recommend medications that can help.

Tips on How to Cope with IBS

- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of water, soluble fiber and avoid high fat foods.
- Try more frequent meals with smaller portions (six times per day rather than three)
- Learn coping skills that lessen vulnerability to stressful situations, such as breathing exercises, relaxation and meditation techniques. Get help for emotional disorders such as depression, panic, or anxiety, which may make IBS worse.