

# What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

## In brief

**Irritable Bowel Syndrome or IBS is the name given to a longstanding condition consisting of frequent abdominal discomfort and bowel symptoms that doctors cannot explain by any other disease.**

### **SYMPTOMS may include:**

- crampy abdominal pain, sometimes severe
- an alteration in bowel habit (diarrhoea, constipation or alternating diarrhoea and constipation)
- bloating and swelling of the abdomen
- rumbling noises and excessive passage of wind
- urgency – a need to rush to the toilet

Other symptoms include; headaches, dizziness, backache, passing urine frequently, tiredness, muscle and joint pains, ringing in the ears, indigestion, belching, nausea, shortness of breath, anxiety and/or depression.

# Diagnosis

IBS is the most likely diagnosis if there is bowel disturbance lasting longer than six months with abdominal pain or bloating, often with many other symptoms. IBS should always be diagnosed by a qualified medical practitioner, do not self-diagnose. There is no test or marker that is specific for IBS. Doctors will carry out a careful history to identify any red flag symptoms and exclude any other serious conditions. Even if your doctor has diagnosed IBS, you should always seek further advice if your symptoms change.

## Who gets IBS?

We all get gut symptoms from time to time, but people with IBS get them more frequently and more severely. At any one time, between 10% and 20% of people living in western countries fulfil the diagnostic criteria for IBS.

## Causes

There is no definite cause for IBS. The most common risk factors include:

- **Post Infectious IBS.** After an attack of gastroenteritis (food poisoning), about 10% of people develop IBS.
- **Antibiotics.** The ingestion of a course of powerful antibiotics to treat life threatening infections can severely deplete the colonic microbiome, (the bacteria that populate the colon).
- **Post Traumatic IBS.** Many people report that their IBS commenced after an event or a series of events that they found particularly traumatic or upsetting. Stress can increase bowel sensitivity.

## Triggers

To understand IBS, it is important to distinguish between what factors may sensitise the gut and cause IBS and what then might trigger the symptoms in a sensitive gut.

Triggers can include previous trauma and stressful situations and certain types of food.

**For more detailed information about IBS go to the charity's website or give us a call.**

## **JOIN THE IBS NETWORK – we are here to help**

We understand how difficult and embarrassing it can be to talk about your symptoms. We know how your symptoms can impact on your life and how miserable they can make you feel. You are not alone. We can offer you support, advice and information to help you live a full and active life again.

Becoming a member of The IBS Network gives you access to a large caring community of support. In addition to our on-line Self Care Programme, e-newsletter and IBS forum, as a member you will be able to access one-to-one advice from a healthcare professional via telephone and email and access recipe ideas for a sensitive gut. You will receive our quarterly magazine, *Gut Reaction*; a selection of factsheets and a 'Can't Wait' card, including our International Travel card for you to use when you are out-and-about. Also included in the membership will be access to our growing number of support groups across the country.



**Visit our website, call us or write to us at**

**The IBS Network  
SOAR Works  
14 Knutton Road  
Sheffield  
S5 9NU**

The IBS Network is the national charity supporting people living with Irritable Bowel Syndrome.

**[www.theibsnetwork.org](http://www.theibsnetwork.org)**

or call **0114 272 3253**

Registered Charity no: 1057563