

## Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome or IBS is a common cause of chronic or recurrent abdominal pain in childhood. Changes in bowel habits such as constipation, diarrhea, bloating or gas are common with irritable bowel syndrome.

It is important to differentiate between IBS and other causes of abdominal pain. The history and physical examination are often sufficient to make the diagnosis.

Certain key signs suggest that there may be another cause for the pain. Testing may be recommended if:

- Weight loss or failure to grow
- Vomiting
- Night waking due to pain
- Bloody diarrhea
- Unexplained fever
- Unusually severe pain or unusual location
- Recent travel or animal exposure
- Consumption of risky foods (unpasteurized milk, uncooked meat)
- Family history of inherited disorder

Testing may include blood, urine or stool samples or imaging studies of the abdomen (X-rays, ultrasound, CT scan or barium tests).

Treatment usually consists of diet and lifestyle changes. These are outlined below.

### Fiber

High fiber diets are helpful to reduce spasms in the colon. A guide for fiber intake is: age in years plus 5 equals grams of fiber per day. Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are good sources of fiber. Fiber supplements such as “Benefiber” are available when goals cannot be met with food.

### Probiotics

Supplementation with beneficial bacteria (probiotics) may help regulate bowel habits. The optimal dose is one billion units per day. An example of a probiotic for children is “Culturelle for Kids.”

### Lactose

Lactose is the sugar in milk. In order for humans to digest lactose, an enzyme called “lactase” is necessary. While deficiency of lactase is extremely uncommon in infancy, levels of this enzyme may decrease with age. Lactose intolerance results when the bacteria in the colon break down the undigested lactose and produce gas, often with pain, constipation or diarrhea. This is NOT an allergy to milk – it is a digestive problem.

A lactose free trial may be helpful. This can be accomplished in one of two ways:

1. No dairy products at all for two weeks (use soy or calcium/vitamin D supplements)
2. Lactaid (milk with added lactase enzyme, or a supplement taken along with dairy)

**Sugars**

Certain types of sugars may cause gas or bloating because they are difficult to digest. These sugars are used as sweeteners in products such as juice, gum, candy and soda. Examples include: sorbitol, xylitol, mannitol, aspartame, splenda and high fructose corn syrup. A trial of avoidance of these particular sugars may be helpful.

**Caffeine**

Caffeine aggravates irritable bowel symptoms, so avoid chocolate, coffee, tea, iced tea, cola, and other caffeine-containing foods or beverages.

**Guided Imagery**

Research shows that children with irritable bowel may benefit from learning techniques for self-relaxation. Guided imagery is one such technique. Children age 10 and up can usually learn guided imagery in a few sessions from a trained counselor.

**Stress or Anxiety**

Irritable bowel episodes may be triggered by stress or anxiety. When these play a role, measures to decrease stress or manage anxiety are useful.

**Exercise**

Regular daily exercise helps decrease irritable bowel pain. Thirty minutes per day is a good place to start, and then increase gradually.

**Medications**

Medications are not usually used for children with irritable bowel syndrome. There are drugs available to decrease the contractions of the intestine for severe cases.

Devised 12/08

Updated 2/11, 11/13, 11/15