What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome, or IBS, is a very common disorder of the digestive tract. It affects the colon, or large intestine, usually over a long period of time. An estimated 30 million people, two thirds of whom are women, suffer from IBS. IBS is not a disease, and should not be confused with ulcerative colitis or Crohn’s Disease. Through the years, it has been called by many names – “nervous” colon, spastic colon, and functional bowel disease. The term “colitis” should never be used to define IBS.

What are the symptoms of IBS?

The term “syndrome” refers to a set of symptoms that occur together. The symptoms of IBS may include abdominal pain, gas, bloating, a change in bowel habits, diarrhea, constipation, or constipation alternating with diarrhea. Rectal bleeding is never a symptom of IBS.

What causes IBS?

It is believed that most of the symptoms of IBS occur when the muscles in the colon do not work properly. The role of the colon, or large intestine, is to act as the waste disposal system of the body and to absorb water from the liquid stool that enters it from the small intestine. The stool then passes to the rectum where it is stored until a bowel movement occurs. The process is controlled by nerves and the muscles of the wall of the colon. In people with IBS, the muscles of the colon contract abnormally. An abnormal contraction, or spasm, may speed up the passage of stool, resulting in diarrhea. At other times, the spasm may delay the passage of stool, resulting in constipation. The exact cause of IBS is unknown. However, symptoms are worsened by emotional stress and a low fiber diet.

How is IBS treated?

Once your health care provider has determined that you have IBS and not a more serious disease, he or she will work closely with you to recommend effective treatment for your IBS. Adding fiber to your diet has clearly been shown to lessen or eliminate IBS symptoms. Dietary fiber is something you ingest (eat) that you cannot digest. The fiber passes through the stomach, through the small intestine and into the colon (large intestine). The fiber then absorbs water and liquid in the colon. If you have diarrhea, the fiber will absorb the extra water and fluid and will make for less frequent and more formed bowel movements. If you have constipation, the fiber will soften the stool and increase your number of bowel movements. Fiber also decreases the pressure in the colon. If needed, your doctor may also recommend long acting anti-diarrhea agents that have been shown to be very effective in treating the diarrhea symptoms of IBS. My advice – only take your fiber on the days you breathe!

Can IBS lead to more serious problems?

IBS has not been shown to lead to any serious disease such as colitis or cancer. All patients with IBS should work closely with their physician to lessen their IBS symptoms. By establishing a close relationship with your health care provider Irritable Bowel Syndrome can be effectively managed. Always remember that rectal bleeding is never a symptom of IBS, and rectal bleeding always needs to be evaluated to determine the exact source of the rectal bleeding.

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