

A GUIDE TO

IBS

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HYPNOTHERAPY



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WHAT IS IBS?



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Most people have heard of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) but many probably don't really understand what it means or the impact it can have. Often it can be a bit of a joke and not taken seriously whereas in reality, it can be a very uncomfortable and debilitating condition that affects many people.

IBS quite simply means that the bowel doesn't work properly.

It is a very common condition. It is estimated that 10 – 15% of people globally suffer with it, however many of those impacted are not aware that it is IBS that they have.

It's not classed as a disease, and there's no test for it.

The most common IBS symptoms include stomach cramps, bloating, diarrhoea, and constipation. These tend to come and go but some can last for days, weeks, or even months at a time. Symptoms vary considerably from person to person and can range from pretty mild to very severe. You may get all of the symptoms, or perhaps just some of them and you may not always get the same symptoms in the same combination.



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Typically, IBS is a lifelong condition that can be very frustrating to live with and can have a significant impact on everyday life. One of the most frustrating elements is that the exact cause of IBS is unknown.

Historically it has been linked to many things including food passing through the gut too fast or slow, oversensitive nerves in the gut, and family history. It is generally agreed that certain foods can trigger IBS and that stress and anxiety may be a cause and certainly makes symptoms worse.

IBS is painful, uncomfortable, inconvenient, and frustrating. However, it is important to remember what it isn't as well as what it is. It isn't dangerous or life-threatening. There is no link to bowel cancer. It doesn't damage the bowel. It won't develop into Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis. It's not an autoimmune disorder (such as arthritis or lupus). It isn't caused by parasites, bacteria, or toxins.

Though there is no cure, there are many things you can do to help manage the symptoms and to make it easier to live with IBS.

If you're concerned about any of your symptoms, then you should always see your GP. It is important to rule out other problems.



FACTS & FIGURES



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- Women are twice as likely to suffer than men.
- IBS affects people of all ages, including children.
- The most common age is between 20 – 30.
- Generally it takes someone two to three years to be accurately diagnosed with IBS

Almost 1 in 3 people in the UK say they suffer from IBS.



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- The economic cost of IBS globally could be as much as \$21 billion.
- In the US, there are between 2.4 to 3.5 million IBS-related doctor visits every year.
- In the UK, an IBS sufferer takes an average of nine days a year off work.
- 6 in 10 sufferers have never had professional help (probably due to the embarrassment associated with IBS).

In the UK 4 in 10 sufferers regularly taking take time off work due to their symptoms.



IBS SYMPTOMS



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The common perception is that IBS is that it simply means needing to go to the toilet for a poo more often. However there are many symptoms, the main ones are:

- Stomach pain or cramps – usually worse after eating and alleviated after a bowel movement.
- Bloating – your stomach may feel uncomfortably full and can sometimes be noticeably and significantly swollen.
- Diarrhoea – you may need to go to the toilet suddenly and may have a watery stool.
- Constipation – you may strain and have pain when going to the toilet and feel like you haven't fully emptied your bowels.

IBS can also cause:

- Flatulence
- Passing mucus
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Backache
- Problems urinating
- Bowel incontinence

There may be days when your symptoms are better and days when they're worse.

Often bad days are referred to as flare-ups and are often triggered by food or drink or particularly stressful situations.

IBS & ANXIETY



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The cause of IBS is not really known or understood. It is worth looking back at when you first noticed your symptoms. Was it a particularly stressful time? (new job, moving house, bereavement, redundancy or relationship problems, etc). Maybe it was after an illness (gastric flu or general stomach upset). This may help identify where IBS started but doesn't really help to understand why it has become an ongoing issue.

Whilst the exact causes of IBS is unclear, it is generally agreed that it's made worse by stress and anxiety. Your stomach is also known as your secondary nervous system. Maybe you've noticed that at times of anxiety and stress, you get a feeling in the pit of your stomach. It may churn, rumble turn or you get "butterflies" when you are nervous (or excited).

In stressful situations, you probably feel nauseous and suffer stomach pain, with or without vomiting or diarrhoea. This is because when you experience stress and anxiety, your body responds automatically. It makes and releases chemicals and brings about physical changes. Historically this provided you with the best possible chance of surviving a threat. This is known as the "fight or flight" response (also "freeze". This works well when the threat you're facing is a fierce animal or a person with violent intent. Which is what our historical threats would be. So there is a useful and positive intention. However, this response doesn't work well in dealing with the modern causes of stress and anxiety.

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A presentation at work, moving home, money issues, relationship problems, or general overthinking are not helped at all by this response. In fact the 'fight or flight' response can often make these situations far more stressful. Yet your body and your mind have not caught up with modern living and so still respond in the same primitive way to these modern-day "threats" as they did to real, physical threats in the past. It is thought your body responds to stress by allowing you to run and fight better, as this gives you a better chance of survival. Adrenalin is produced and released enabling you to run faster or fight more aggressively. Other chemical changes can encourage you to empty your stomach and bowel to allow you to run further and faster or fight more effectively. So you feel sick or urgently need the loo.

When you think about the reaction to stressful situations, it begins to make sense. You might have heard people say "gut reaction" or that they feel "sick with worry". This is the stomach's response to stress. For many, it is often the first symptom you notice when you're anxious. Those with IBS simply have a bowel that is particularly sensitive to stress.

Also when you notice a bodily problem or issue, such as the symptoms of IBS, we all tend to pay more attention to that area than we normally would. The more we pay attention to it, the more concerned we become.

A vicious circle

You worry about the symptoms of IBS you are experiencing, you worry about what is causing them which makes you more stressed and anxious.

As we know stress and anxiety exacerbate your IBS symptoms.

The worse you feel, the more you worry. Creating a cycle and it gets worse and worse.



IBS DIAGNOSIS



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IBS means an impaired bowel function. However, you may not have any obvious signs or other symptoms which would typically lead to a diagnosis of disease. Your bowel simply doesn't work as well as it should. So this means there is no specific test to diagnose IBS. Unfortunately, many of the symptoms overlap with other issues which in itself can cause worry and anxiety. Most likely you will search for the symptoms online and come to a worst case scenario - avoid this and visit your GP!

Then you can have tests to rule these other issues (for example a blood test to check for problems such as coeliac disease). Only once these are ruled out, IBS can be diagnosed. So, this can be a long and stressful process (and we know what stress means for IBS).

If you are worried about your symptoms it is important to visit your GP. Typically, your GP will ask about your symptoms, how often they come and go, when you get them (for example, after eating certain foods), how long you've had them, etc. So, it can help to write down details of your symptoms to help you remember them.

The GP may also feel your stomach to check for swelling or lumps. They may also take a sample of your poo to check for infections and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). If the GP thinks you have IBS, they will talk to you about what it is and what the treatment options are.

Medications for IBS

There are some medications available from the pharmacy that may help. Popular choices include peppermint oil, probiotics, vitamin D, and beta-glucan fiber. Ask the pharmacist for more information and guidance - they are happy to help!

If these medications are not helping, a GP may prescribe stronger medicine. This may include amitriptyline or citalopram which are typically used as antidepressants. However, these can also help ease IBS symptoms. They may take a few weeks to start working and can cause side effects.

Your GP will discuss the pros and cons of these options with you and work out what is best for you.



IBS & FOOD



So we know that stress exacerbates symptoms but many people also find that certain foods trigger their symptoms. It is worth keeping a diary of everything you eat and drink for two weeks, with a note of when your symptoms flare-up. This will help you to identify which foods you may be sensitive to.

After the two weeks, if for example you noticed your symptoms were worse after drinking coffee, and this happened more than once, then try cutting out coffee for a week. Carry on writing the diary and monitor if this makes a difference. If cutting out the food or drink makes no difference, then it may simply have been a coincidence that your symptoms flared up afterwards. However, if it shows that cutting out certain food or drink reduces the symptoms, then it's probably a trigger and you should continue to avoid it. You can continue this trial and error approach. Gradually identify and cut out one type of food or drink at a time. It can be frustrating but once you identify any triggers, it will really help your overall health and wellbeing.

Your GP may refer you to an NHS dietitian or you may choose to visit one privately. They can suggest other changes you can make to your diet to ease your symptoms. Many will recommend a diet called a low FODMAP diet which involves avoiding foods that are not easily broken down by the gut, including some types of fruit and vegetables, milk, wheat products, etc. There is a lot of information available online about FODMAP worth checking out.

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Everyone is different and you should try and discover what triggers your own symptoms. However, IBS is thought to be particularly affected by the following food types.

Remember though that for some people food doesn't seem to be a trigger.

- Dairy products – milk, cream, ice cream (and products containing these ingredients) contain lactose which might be hard for you to digest. This can trigger IBS. Yoghurt and cheese tend to be ok as they contain bacteria that help digest the lactose, so they don't seem to be a trigger.
- Cabbage, broccoli, onion, and beans produce excessive gas that can cause painful cramps. (however, some people find that these foods help to reduce symptoms!)
- Citrus fruits – lemons, limes, oranges, seem to worsen IBS in some sufferers
- Spicy foods - so curries, salsas etc!



Other dietary suggestions

- Eat regular, small meals as these are easier to digest. You may notice a flare-up after eating too much at one time.
- Drink six to eight small glasses of water every day.
- Avoid caffeine and fizzy drinks, although unless you are very sensitive to caffeine, the odd cup of coffee now and then is fine.
- Tea, diluted soft drinks, and herbal teas are all fine. You can also try peppermint tea to help an upset stomach.
- Anything with high water content helps prevents you from becoming dehydrated and helps your digestion (especially helpful if diarrhoea is a key symptom).
- Avoid excessive alcohol - which is a good idea in general but especially for those with IBS as alcohol is a known digestive system irritant.
- Avoid artificial sweeteners (sugar-free mints and gum often contain these).
- Lots of people with IBS eat more fibre to try to help, but too much cereal fibre can worsen symptoms. Cut down, and, if you have severe symptoms perhaps avoid cereal fibre altogether.





IBS & THERAPY

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There is increasing evidence showing that clinical hypnosis is an effective option for managing IBS. During this process, a hypnotherapist helps you enter into a particular psychological state (often referred to as trance) usually involving both highly-focused attention and deepened relaxation. Once in this state, the therapist teaches you how to gain control of physiological responses and symptoms that are not usually under conscious control.

The hypnotherapist can use a variety of techniques during this process, including progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and the use of suggestive images and metaphors. It is important to remember that you do not lose control during this process. Instead, you actively collaborate to allow the suggestions to alter your inner experience.

Relaxation is key when working with IBS (and many other issues). You can't be hot and cold, or hungry and full, at the same time and similarly, you can't be relaxed and anxious. Relaxation and anxiety are mutually exclusive. It's well documented that your body feels less pain and discomfort when relaxed. Hypnotherapy increases relaxation and reduces anxiety and the perception of pain.

In addition to promoting relaxation and managing pain and discomfort, hypnotherapy for IBS also teaches you to influence and gain control of gut function. It strengthens the mind-body connection helping promote a more appropriate response to situations, without activating the fight/flight mode and associated bodily response.

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Hypnosis is tailored for each individual. So for example someone with diarrhoea is asked to visualise building a dam or blocking the river with rocks. But if your IBS means you struggle with constipation, you'd think about rocks blocking the flow, and imagine sweeping these obstacles away. This is quite a simple way to look at how the suggestions work but gives an idea of the types of suggestions that may be used.

There are different theories about why hypnotherapy works to help IBS. One is that by increasing relaxation and reducing anxiety, the bowel simply reacts less, and symptoms improve. Another theory is that hypnotherapy affects the anterior cingulate cortex, which processes pain.

Research is ongoing but we do know that hypnosis affects the mind, and we know without any doubt that the mind has an effect on bodily function. There are many other illnesses that are made much worse by stress. For example tinnitus and restless leg syndrome get much worse when you're stressed. By treating your mind – changing your thoughts, beliefs, and ideas – you can improve your symptoms.

Hypnotherapy is proven to help the symptoms of IBS, and can help you with pain management and general discomfort. This means that if you can control the symptoms, pain, and discomfort associated with IBS, then you can live a relatively IBS-free life.

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Hypnotherapy is now acknowledged within the wider medical profession as an evidenced-based therapy that can help reduce the symptoms of IBS, and sometimes alleviate those symptoms entirely.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) lists hypnotherapy as one of the treatments to help with IBS.

Peter Whorwell is the Professor of Medicine and Gastroenterology at Manchester University Medical School. He has researched and worked with hypnotherapy as an effective treatment for IBS for many years. Clinical trials have shown that hypnotherapy successfully treats Irritable Bowel Syndrome in more than 70% of cases.

IBS & ME



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I can't remember when I first started having symptoms of IBS. Looking back now and I think there may have been some all my adult life. However, it was particularly bad around 2014. It was quite a hectic time in my life with job changes, moving house, etc. and I had recently been diagnosed with anxiety and depression and had started taking medication. Not long after I started to notice pain in my stomach and changes in my toilet habits. Any similar experiences in the past lasted a few days then always seemed to resolve itself. However, these periods of discomfort lasted much longer.

I went back to my GP and we both came to the same conclusion that it was likely a side effect of my medication. So, we tried another for a few months, but that didn't seem to help, and then we tried another. In fact, with each change, my symptoms seemed to get worse and I was beginning to get worried about what else it may be. Eventually, the symptoms seemed to settle down somewhat and I carried on that particular medication (citalopram) though I would have flare-ups from time to time.

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I also tried all the other things such as going gluten free, cutting out certain foods, etc but nothing made a significant difference. After a particularly bad flare-up I visited the nurse at work as I couldn't get a GP appointment (and was getting a bit embarrassed at the frequency of my visits). They fast-tracked me through a work scheme and I was seen quite quickly by a specialist. I had numerous tests done over a period of a few months including colonoscopy, blood tests, etc. Everything was coming back clear and eventually I was diagnosed with IBS. The professor who diagnosed me talked through different options, including different diets. He also highly recommended hypnotherapy to help with the symptoms.

It was only later, when I saw the same man on TV, that I realised Prof. Peter Whorhwell was a world-renowned specialist in IBS and a major advocate for the use of hypnotherapy. I took his advice and started hypnotherapy. Over the course of a few months my symptoms became much more manageable and my life really did change! As well as reducing the symptoms it hugely boosted my confidence and motivation and I felt like I was able to live life fully again.

I knew I had to find out more and started my journey towards becoming. Hypnotherapist myself, with a particular interest in helping those with IBS.

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Get in touch for a chat to find out how
hypnotherapy could help you.

Book a [free consultation](#) to find out more.

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