

**Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)**

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## Irritable Bowel Syndrome

### A patient's guide

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## What is Irritable Bowel syndrome (IBS)?

It is best described as a disorder of the gastro-intestinal system, which includes the stomach and the large bowel. In other words, the digestive system is not working properly. It is not linked to any serious disease and is not contagious.

## What are the symptoms?

They can include diarrhoea, constipation or erratic bowel habits, which can mean alternating diarrhoea and constipation. Sometimes there may be mucus mixed with the stools.

Other symptoms may include:

- Abdominal discomfort or cramps
- Urgency to open bowels
- A bloated feeling, normally after eating
- Excess wind
- Feeling that bowels have not emptied properly following a bowel movement
- Nausea

## What causes it?

The exact cause is unclear. Many people have irritable bowel syndrome in some form or other but it is thought that it can be made worse by outside influences such as stress or individual reactions to certain foods.

## Stress

Although stress is thought to influence IBS, it is difficult to avoid it completely. The following changes in lifestyle could help reduce the stress:

- Slowing down, leaving plenty of time to do things such as eating and travelling
- Taking time (10 -15 minutes) every day to wind down and relax quietly
- Take regular exercise such as a short walk every day.

## Food

Certain foods can make symptoms worse; different foods affect different people in different ways – there is no hard and fast rule.

Sometimes strong foods such as onions and curries, or dairy products such as cheese and butter can affect the IBS.

A high fibre diet with fresh fruit and vegetables can help with constipation but it can also cause abdominal pains and wind. So you may need to experiment with your child's diet to find out what suits them best.

IBS cannot be cured but it can be controlled. There are medicines that can help reduce the symptoms.

Most people with IBS find that their symptoms are well controlled by taking medications such as Loperamide for diarrhoea and Movicol for constipation.

Some research suggests that probiotics (live bacteria that can be bought in various forms) can improve symptoms in some children.

There are also other medications, such as Amitriptyline that may suit your child better than those listed above. Talk to your GP or pharmacist, who may be able to suggest the right medication for your child's particular symptoms.

It should not be necessary to attend hospital or your GP surgery regularly in order to control your child's IBS.

## Advice if your symptoms change?

Important – if your child experiences any of the following symptoms

- Bleeding from the back passage
- Sudden weight loss
- Persistent vomiting

You must go to see your GP as these may be a warning of a different problem.