



## IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME FACT SHEET

### **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. Through the years, it has been called by many names – “nervous” colon, mucous colitis, spastic colon, colitis, spastic bowel, and functional bowel disease. Most of these terms are inaccurate.

### **What are the symptoms of IBS?**

The term “syndrome” refers to a set of symptoms that occur together. The symptoms of IBS 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. This process is controlled by nerves, hormones, and the muscles in the colon. In people with IBS, the muscles of the colon contract abnormally. An abnormal contraction, or spasm, may delay the passage of stool, resulting in constipation. At other times, the spasm may speed up the passage of stool, resulting in diarrhea.

The exact cause of IBS is unknown. However, it is often associated with emotional stress or poor dietary habits.

### **How is IBS treated?**

Once your doctor has determined that you have IBS and not a more serious disease, he or she will work closely with you to identify situations or foods which may cause your IBS symptoms to flare up. For example, you may need to closely monitor the amount and frequency of dairy products and fatty foods.

Adding fiber to your diet also has clearly been shown to be helpful in lessening IBS symptoms. Dietary fiber helps soften the stool and normalize the time the waste material takes to pass through the colon. Fiber also decreases the pressure in the colon.

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## IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME (continued)

Over-the-counter, all natural high fiber supplements are easy ways to increase fiber in your diet. They can be readily mixed with orange juice or water, and sugar-free varieties are available.

Long acting anti-diarrhea agents have been shown to be very effective in treating IBS. Laxatives should be avoided unless closely supervised by a physician as your colon can become dependent on them.

### **Can IBS lead to more serious problems?**

IBS has not been shown to lead to any serious, organic 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 physician, Irritable Bowel Syndrome can be effectively managed.