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Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common condition in which individuals may experience irregular bowel movements, diarrhea, constipation and abdominal bloating or pain. The pattern and severity of symptoms can vary from person to person.

Food allergy & IBS

Many patients feel that diet affects their IBS and suspect that they may be allergic to one or more foods. It is certainly true that some foods can upset IBS, but there is little evidence that this is due to a true allergy.

It is possible that symptoms may be due to an intolerance to foods. In this case the regular allergy skin test won't help to identify the trigger because it tests for allergy not intolerance.

Unfortunately, inaccurate and contradictory advice is often given by non-medical 'allergists' or alternative practitioners and a wide range of unproven tests such as IgG blood tests are used. The only reliable way to find out if symptoms are made worse by foods is by an exclusion or elimination diet. This is best done under the supervision of a dietitian.

Tips for Managing IBS:

Most people find that their bowels work better if they:

- _ Eat regular meals
- _ Drink plenty of fluid
- _ Chew food well and take time over meals
- _ Follow a balanced diet
- _ Take time to relax
- _ Perform regular exercise

If the main symptom is constipation:

_ Eat regular meals - skipping breakfast is not recommended as the bowels lose an important reflex triggered by the first meal of the day.

_ Drink 8-10 glasses of fluid each day to help the stools stay soft.

_ Increase fibre in the diet gradually to find a level that helps. It is best to do this by eating more fruit and vegetables aiming for a minimum of 5 portions a day. Porridge oats are a good source of fibre which may also help. Bran is best avoided as this can worsen symptoms of bloating.

If the main symptom is diarrhea:

- _ Eat regular meals and try not to eat large meals late at night.
- _ Reduce caffeine intake from tea, coffee and cola
- _ Drink more water, sugar free squash or herbal teas.
- _ Reduce alcohol intake.
- _ Reduce intake of fruit juices.
- _ Avoid sorbitol in sugar free sweets, mints and gum.

If the main symptom is wind and bloating:

(IBS sufferers do not produce more gas than other people but they are more aware of it and it can feel as if it gets trapped.)

- _ Reduce intake of legume (beans and lentils), cabbage, Brussel sprouts, onions
- _ Avoid fizzy drinks
- _ Reduce intake of ready-made meals, tinned or packet soups, ready-made sauces. Try to use fresh ingredients as much as possible. Reduce intake of dried pasta and use fresh pasta instead.

If the above suggestions have not helped, try keeping a food and symptom diary. A diary may help to identify whether certain food groups are causing symptoms e.g. dairy products or wheat. When excluding a food group, plan ahead and think about what it can be replaced with e.g. replacing milk products with calcium fortified soya products.

In general, you need to exclude that food for 4-6 weeks, if feeling well with resolved symptoms then to re-introduce that food for 1 week to check for relapse of symptoms.

If the exclusion has helped and is going to be long-term, you must consult a Dietitian to get an advice on how to ensure the remaining diet is well balanced.

Note: It is not normal/ part of IBS to experience continuous diarrhea (lasting more than 14 consecutive days), blood in the stool or weight loss. Anyone with these symptoms should consult a physician.

You can find this hand out among other allergy info on my website: www.doctorahmed.ca