

# Healthy Eating and Lifestyle Advice for Irritable Bowel Syndrome

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# Introduction

This booklet provides advice on how to minimise symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) by following a healthy diet and lifestyle.

## What is irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)?

IBS is a common condition associated with abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhoea and/or constipation. Symptoms can come and go. It does not lead to serious bowel disorders but it can be distressing. Diet and lifestyle changes can help to control your symptoms.

## What causes IBS?

The cause of IBS is unknown. It may develop after a gut infection and people with IBS often report that stress and anxiety increase their symptoms.

## What are the symptoms of IBS?

IBS symptoms vary from person to person – sometimes they are settled while at other times they flare up. You may find you feel worse after eating certain foods. Women may find that their menstrual cycle affects their IBS symptoms.

Common IBS symptoms include:

- abdominal pain or discomfort which may be relieved by opening your bowels
- constipation and/or diarrhoea
- bloating and/or distension
- excessive wind
- passing mucus

- feeling the need to open your bowels, even if you have just been to the toilet
- a feeling of urgency to open your bowels
- nausea.

## How is IBS diagnosed?

There are no tests that can diagnose IBS. Symptoms can be very similar to other digestive disorders. Your GP will assess your symptoms and carry out blood tests to rule out other digestive conditions such as coeliac disease or inflammatory bowel disease. It is important to have these tests before making changes to your diet.

IBS symptoms can be very similar to undiagnosed coeliac disease symptoms.

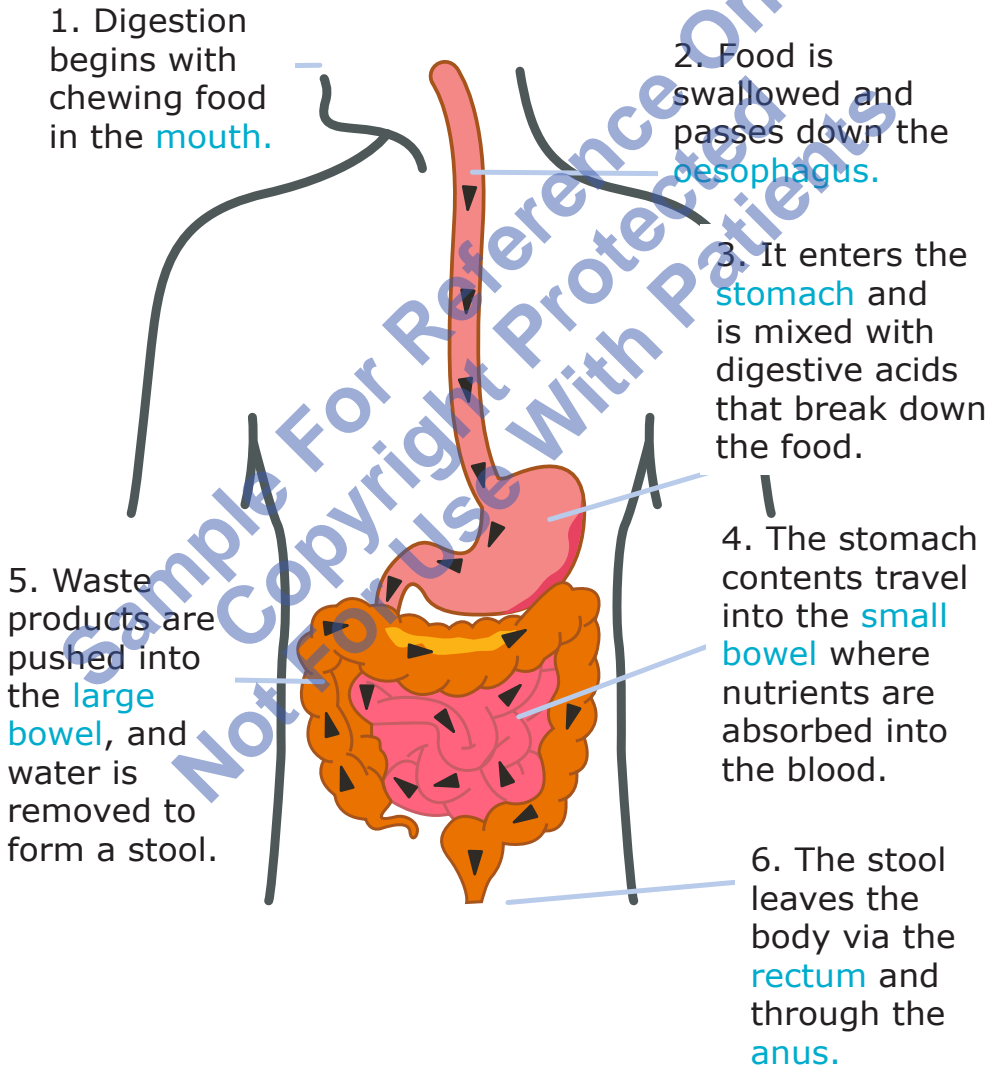
### **Ensure that your GP tests you for coeliac disease.**

- Follow a normal diet that includes gluten in more than one meal a day for at least 6 weeks before testing and throughout the diagnostic process.
- Foods that contain gluten include bread, chapattis and pasta.

(NICE clinical guideline 86, [www.nice.org.uk/cg86](http://www.nice.org.uk/cg86))

## What happens during healthy digestion?

During healthy digestion, food is mixed with digestive juices and broken down as it moves through the digestive system. The digestive system includes the mouth, oesophagus, stomach, small bowel, large bowel, rectum, and anus.



## Healthy eating and lifestyle advice

Following a healthy diet and lifestyle is the first step to improving your IBS symptoms.

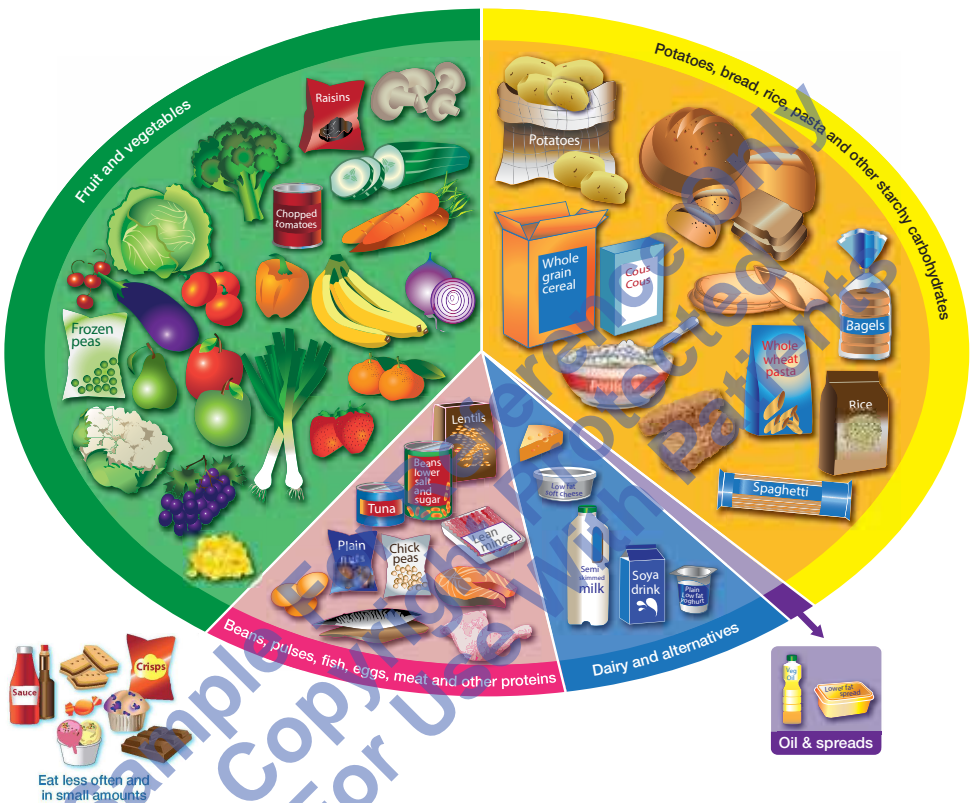
### Top tips for healthy eating and living with IBS

Top tip	Notes
Eat regular meals and snacks, including breakfast.	Try to space meals evenly through the day. Avoid long gaps between eating and aim for a regular meal pattern with breakfast, lunch, evening meal and snacks in between, if needed.  If symptoms increase at night try not to eat for up to 3 hours before going to bed.
Smaller meal sizes may ease symptoms.	Symptoms may get worse when you eat a large meal.
Eat fruit and vegetables.	Aim to have at least 5 portions of variety of fruit and vegetables spread throughout the day (see pages 9-10).
Cut down on eating fried, fatty or rich foods.	Foods like cakes, biscuits, chocolate, pies, pastries, batter, chips, crisps, cheese, quiche, pizza, lasagne and creamy sauces are high in fat and should be limited.

Top tip	Notes
<p>Aim to drink 1.5-2 litres (2.5-3 pints) of fluid a day.</p> <p>Water and still, naturally caffeine-free and decaffeinated drinks are best.</p>	<p>Check you are having enough fluid through the day. Ideally your urine should be a pale straw colour.</p> <p>If you are increasing your fibre intake, be aware that you should also increase your fluid intake - this may mean that you need to have more than general guideline amounts.</p> <p>Try to limit fizzy, caffeinated and alcoholic drinks as these may make your symptoms worse (see pages 11-12).</p>
<p>Enjoy your mealtimes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Take your time and chew food well.</li> <li>● Eat sitting in an upright position at a table.</li> </ul>	<p>Symptoms may get worse when you eat quickly or gulp down food. Take time to eat and chew your food well.</p> <p>Try to make eating a pleasurable and sociable experience.</p>
<p>Be more active and try to achieve a healthy weight.</p>	<p>Ask your doctor or dietitian for more information on weight management.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● If you need to reduce your weight, lose it gradually by making lifestyle and dietary changes that you can maintain.</li> <li>● If you need to gain weight, ask to be referred to a dietitian.</li> </ul>
<p>Make time to relax as stress can trigger IBS symptoms.</p>	<p>Try walking, reading, spending more time with your friends, family and pets, listening to music or relaxation tapes, gardening, massage, or yoga.</p>

## What is a healthy diet?

The Eatwell Guide below provides advice for everyone on how to get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.



Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland

- Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates
  - Include potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, oats, sweet potatoes, noodles, maize (corn), cassava, breakfast cereals, yam and millet.
  - Eat a variety of these foods and try to include them with each meal.



- Wholegrain varieties are best as these are high in fibre.
- Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other protein
  - Include meat, fish, eggs, beans, tofu, Quorn, pulses, nuts and seeds.
  - Eat these foods in moderate amounts. Choose lean meat and avoid frying to reduce your fat intake.
  - Aim to eat 2 portions of fish each week, including at least one portion of oily fish such as mackerel, salmon, fresh/frozen tuna (not canned) and sardines. Oily fish is high in omega-3 fats, which may help to prevent heart disease.
- Dairy and alternatives
  - Include milk, cheese, yoghurts.
  - Low-lactose or calcium-enriched non-dairy alternatives such as soya milk and yoghurts.
  - Eat these foods in moderate amounts and choose low-fat varieties as these usually contain as much calcium as full-fat varieties.
- Fruit and vegetables
  - Try to have at least 5 portions every day, spread throughout the day. Fresh, frozen, canned or dried all count!
  - What is a portion?  
*Fresh fruit such as:*
    - a handful of berries
    - 2 small fruits like kiwi fruit or plums

- 1 medium-sized fruit like a banana or an orange
- 1 slice of a large fruit like melon or pineapple.

*Dried fruit such as:*

- a tablespoon of raisins, sultanas or cranberries
- 3 dried apricots or figs.

*Vegetables such as:*

- 4 tablespoons of green vegetables like cabbage, spinach or green beans
- a dessert bowl of salad vegetables
- 3 heaped tablespoons of cooked root vegetables like diced carrots, swede or parsnip
- 3 handfuls/tablespoons of small vegetables like sliced mushrooms
- a medium-sized vegetable like an onion.

*Juices and smoothies*

- 150ml (¼ pint) of fruit/vegetable juice, or pure fruit/vegetable smoothie.

Note – Juices only count as one portion a day, no matter how much you drink. Smoothies may count as up to 2 portions a day depending on how they are made. Refer to pack details for more information.

- Foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar
  - Provide energy, fats and some vitamins.
  - Only have these foods occasionally and in small quantities.
  - Examples include butter, margarine, ghee, mayonnaise, cream, cakes, biscuits, pastries, crisps, sweets, chocolate and sugary drinks.

## What about my fluid intake?

- Fluid intake is important. Aim to drink 1.5-2 litres (2.5-3 pints) of fluid per day.

Remember to drink with foods that contain fibre (see examples on page 14).

- Water, herbal/fruit teas and sugar-free squash are good choices.
- Fruit juice only counts as one portion of fruit a day, no matter how much you drink.
- Try to limit caffeinated, alcoholic and fizzy drinks as these can aggravate IBS symptoms.

## Caffeine

The amount of caffeine in food and drink varies. The list below provides high-caffeine examples.

- Coffee  
Ground coffee has the most caffeine, but instant coffee still has a lot. Try limiting the amount you have or switch to decaffeinated varieties.
- Tea  
Try limiting the amount you have, switch to decaffeinated varieties or use herbal or fruit tea instead.
- Cola or iron brew  
All varieties including 'diet' or 'no sugar' are high in caffeine. Try decaffeinated versions or caffeine-free soft drinks like lemonade.
- 'Energy' drinks  
This includes brands such as Red Bull, Rock Star, Relentless, Monster, Irn Bru 32. All are very high in caffeine and should be avoided.

- **Chocolate**  
Chocolate in food and drinks contains caffeine. The amount of caffeine depends on the variety, for example plain chocolate has about double the caffeine of milk chocolate.

## Alcohol

Keep to recommended limits for alcohol.

- Current advice is that we should have no more than 14 units per week (2-3 units per day).
- If you do drink as much as 14 units week, it is best to spread this evenly across the week.

[www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)

The table below provides examples of the units in a variety of alcoholic drinks.

Drink	Units
125ml glass of 13% wine	1.6
175ml glass of 13% wine	2.3
250ml glass of 13% wine	3.2
1 pint (568ml) of low strength (3.6%) lager/ale/cider	2.0
1 pint (568ml) of high strength (5.2%) lager/ale/cider	3.0
1 can (440ml) of medium strength (5.0%) lager/ale/cider	2.2
1 pub measure (25ml) of spirit (40%) – gin, vodka, whisky	1.0

Read product labels for further guidance.

## Further dietary considerations

After following the general healthy eating guidelines above, it is helpful to think in more detail about your diet.

### What about fibre?

Dietary fibre is found naturally in many foods and helps digestion. It affects the consistency of your stools and how often you open your bowels.

Fibre is found in:

- cereals and grains including oats, wheat, rye, barley and rice and cereal-based products including bread, breakfast cereals, pasta. Wholemeal or wholegrain varieties tend to have the most fibre
- peas, beans, lentils, Quorn
- fruit and vegetables
- nuts and seeds.

Changing your fibre intake can help IBS symptoms. The amount of fibre you need will vary depending on your symptoms, tolerance of high-fibre foods and current fibre intake.

- If you already include a lot of high-fibre foods, consider reducing your intake.
- If you feel you need to increase your fibre intake, do so gradually.

## Notes:

- To prevent constipation, increase the amount of fluid you drink as you increase your fibre intake.
- Sudden increases in dietary fibre may aggravate abdominal pain, increase wind, bloating and diarrhoea.
- Do not add wheat bran to your food as this can aggravate IBS symptoms.
- Try adding linseeds to your foods such as cereal, bread, yoghurts etc. Start with half a teaspoon daily, increasing to a tablespoon, and always take them with fluid. It can take up to 6 months to see the benefits.

If you continue to experience IBS symptoms after making changes to your dietary fibre intake, ask to be referred to a dietitian for further advice.

## What about fatty foods?

Fatty and greasy foods may increase IBS symptoms. It is also important to limit high-fat foods as part of a healthy balanced diet.

The following tips will help to reduce your fat intake.

- Use less oil, butter, spreads, mayonnaise and cream. Instead choose oil spray, a scraping of low-fat spread or low-fat natural yoghurt.
- Eat fewer chips, biscuits, cakes, crisps, sausages and pastry products like pies and takeaway meals.
- Grill, poach, steam, boil, microwave or bake instead of frying.

## What about probiotics?

Probiotic products contain live microorganisms often called 'friendly' or 'good' bacteria. These may help IBS symptoms. A wide range is available as yoghurts, fermented milk drinks, powders, tablets and supplements. Some of these products may contain ingredients that can increase IBS symptoms.

If you choose to try a probiotic product, include it daily for 4 weeks at the dose recommended by the manufacturer. If you find it beneficial, continue to use it although long term effects are not known.

## Can stress affect my IBS symptoms?

Lifestyle factors such as anxiety or stress may trigger IBS symptoms. Make time to relax and take part in activities that you enjoy. The list below provides some suggestions.

- Take regular exercise such as walking.
- Make sure you have enough sleep and try to relax as much as possible.
- Identify sources of stress and try to avoid them or find new ways of dealing with them.
- Try relaxation techniques like meditation or yoga, hypnotherapy or behavioural therapies such as counselling.

If you continue to feel stressed, ask your GP to provide further advice and guidance.

## More questions...

### **What should I do if my symptoms are not getting better?**

Ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian can provide specialist advice to help you achieve a healthy diet and improve your symptoms.

Research has shown careful implementation of a diet low in fermentable carbohydrates called FODMAPs can improve IBS gut symptoms. This diet is complex and must only be followed with specialist advice from a dietitian trained to use it. He/she will develop an individualised diet plan that considers your usual diet and symptoms to ensure you receive all the nutrients you need.

### **Will keeping a food, lifestyle and symptom diary be useful?**

Keeping a food, lifestyle and symptom diary may help you to find a link between eating and lifestyle habits with your symptoms. Your dietitian may use this to assess and advise you.

### **Do specific foods cause my symptoms?**

If you think certain foods such as wheat or dairy trigger or cause your symptoms, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian. Your diet may lack vital nutrients if you avoid foods without suitable guidance. A dietitian will check if your symptoms relate to specific foods and ensure that your diet is balanced.



## Will food intolerance tests help to identify which foods I need to avoid?

Food intolerance tests are expensive and do not help identify which foods trigger symptoms. The test results can lead you to follow a diet that lacks many of the nutrients that you need. Always speak to your dietitian to check if there are any suitable tests available to you.

### Notes and contacts

There are lots of places for support and advice.

The IBS Network ([www.theibsnetwork.org](http://www.theibsnetwork.org)) is the UK's national charity for IBS. It issues a regular magazine and newsletter, runs a telephone helpline and email response service by health care professionals, supports campaigns and research and issues 'can't wait' cards to access toilet facilities in offices and shops.

Use the space below to add in local contacts and notes to help you manage your IBS:

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