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Endoscopy

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The Centre for GI Health

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common disorder affecting between 10% - 14% of adult Australians and usually presents with symptoms of recurring abdominal pain, often associated with episodes of constipation that may alternate with bouts of diarrhoea.

Patients often complain of feeling bloated or of abdominal distension and there may be increased passage of mucus from the back passage.

There are multiple factors that lead to IBS:

Some patients experience altered contractility of the intestine which may play a major role in contributing to symptoms (for example, excessive contraction of the intestine may induce cramps and pain, and reduced contraction may lead to constipation and subsequent bloating)

Patients often cite dietary factors as possible contributors to symptoms. Not uncommonly lactose-containing products (dairy products) and fructose-containing foods as well as other fermentable carbohydrates (FODMAPs) are implicated. Alcohol and caffeine may also contribute. Patients may report symptoms during periods of stress or around their time of menstruation. IBS symptoms may develop following an episode of gastroenteritis.

Sometimes serious illnesses present with symptoms similar to irritable bowel syndrome such as colitis, peptic ulcers and cancer. Investigations may need to be performed to exclude these important diagnoses

It is important to understand that IBS does not affect life expectancy. Symptoms may wax and wane, recurring in some patients months after a period of feeling well. This can be very frustrating for patients. The reason for this pattern of recurrence is not well understood, but in some patients can be linked to a period of emotional distress or changed dietary intake (note FODMAPS).

Special medications may help manage symptoms including antispasmodic agents e.g. peppermint tea, "Mintec", "Colofac", "Buscopan" or "Donnatabs" and tricyclic antidepressants e.g. Amitriptyline - which have a dampening effect on internal pain perception when taken in low dose. Fibre mixtures help with constipation and binding agents can be useful for symptoms of diarrhoea.

Restricting or eliminating components of the diet containing FODMAPs may be extremely useful. Carbohydrate hydrogen breath testing will establish which of the FODMAPs to eliminate.

