

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common functional gastrointestinal disorder that affects the digestive system, causing symptoms like abdominal cramps, bloating, and changes in bowel habits, and can significantly affect your quality of life. In many ways, it is a diagnosis of exclusion, once other alarming causes have been excluded. This may include undergoing endoscopic procedures, and abdominal scans.

Once other concerning causes have been excluded, treatment needs to be personalised, and can vary from simple dietary changes, to using over the counter supplements and prescription medications to manage symptoms.

## What are the main symptoms of IBS?

IBS symptoms vary between individuals but typically include recurrent abdominal pain or cramping (often relieved by a bowel movement), bloating, excess gas, and a change in bowel habits. The bowel habits can vary from frequent and/or loose bowel motions to constipation, and sometimes a mix of both.

## How is IBS diagnosed?

There is no single "test" for IBS. Diagnosis is based on a clinical evaluation of your symptoms and medical history.

However, it is essential to rule out other conditions like Coeliac disease, Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), or bowel cancer.

Depending on your age and symptoms, Dr Lamba may recommend blood tests, stool samples, colonoscopy or abdominal scan to ensure an accurate diagnosis.

## Does IBS cause permanent damage to the bowel?

No. Unlike Inflammatory Bowel Disease (such as Crohn's or Ulcerative Colitis), IBS does not cause inflammation, ulcers, or permanent damage to the tissues of the digestive tract. It also does not increase your risk of developing colorectal cancer.

## Can diet help manage my symptoms?

Diet is often a cornerstone of IBS management. Many patients find relief through the **Low FODMAP Diet**, which identifies specific carbohydrates that are difficult to digest.

We often recommend working with a specialised dietitian to ensure who can assess your unique dietary pattern in detail, and suggest a personalised dietary plan to ensure your diet remains balanced while identifying your specific "trigger foods."

## What role does stress play in IBS?

The gut and brain are closely linked through the "gut-brain axis." Stress, anxiety, and even past infections can make the gut more sensitive and change how it functions.

While stress doesn't *cause* IBS, it is a well-known trigger that can worsen the frequency and severity of flare-ups.

## Are there medical treatments available for IBS?

Yes. Depending on your specific symptoms, treatments may include fibre supplements, anti-spasmodic medications to reduce cramping, laxatives, or anti-diarrheal medications.

In some cases, low-dose "gut-brain" medications are used to decrease the sensitivity of the nerves in the digestive tract.

## When should I see a specialist about my bowel symptoms?

When diagnosing irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), specialists look closely for "Red Flag" symptoms. These are clinical signs that are **not** caused by IBS and typically indicate a different underlying condition that may require urgent investigation.

These include:

### 1. Rectal Bleeding

IBS does not cause bleeding. If you notice blood in your stool or on the paper, it may indicate other issues such as Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), haemorrhoids, or bowel cancer.

### 2. Unexplained Weight Loss

IBS is a functional disorder and does not typically lead to significant or rapid weight loss.

### 3. Nocturnal Symptoms (Waking up at Night)

IBS symptoms generally follow the body's circadian rhythm. If you are frequently woken up from sleep by a strong urge to have a bowel movement or by abdominal pain, this is considered a non-IBS symptom.

### 4. Fever or Signs of Infection

IBS does not cause a high temperature or systemic inflammation. Persistent fever alongside bowel changes usually points toward an infection or an inflammatory condition like Crohn's disease.

### 5. Anaemia (Iron Deficiency)

Because IBS does not cause blood loss or malabsorption of nutrients, it should not lead to anaemia. Low iron levels found in blood tests are a "Red Flag" that typically requires a diagnostic colonoscopy or gastroscopy.

### 6. New Symptoms in Older Patients

If bowel habits change significantly for the first time in older patients, it is less likely to be the start of IBS and may require further investigation to exclude any concerning cause.

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