

Advice for Irritable Bowel Syndrome

What is IBS?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common long-term condition affecting the digestive system. It causes abdominal pain, bloating, wind, diarrhoea, constipation, or a mixture of these symptoms. IBS is a functional disorder, meaning the gut looks normal on tests but does not work as it should. It is a diagnosis of exclusion and **it is important that doctors have ruled out other bowel conditions before diagnosing you with this**. Symptoms are influenced by diet, stress, lifestyle, gut sensitivity, and gut bacteria, and they can vary over time and between individuals.

Here are some little ways you can help symptoms:

Stress and Lifestyle: The Gut–Brain Axis (Why Stress Affects IBS)

Your gut and brain are closely connected through nerves and hormones. The more stressed and/or anxious you are, the worse your symptoms can be. This is because your gut can be affected by adrenaline and cortisol released when you are stressed or anxious. Equally if you have poor quality or not enough sleep or you are not active your body can become physically stressed and release adrenaline and cortisol. The release of these hormones can cause increased gut sensitivity, worsening cramps, and can affect bowel habits. Reducing your stress and make some small positive lifestyle changes can help hugely.

What can help:

- Stress management and relaxation techniques
- A good sleep routine aiming for 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night
- Daily activity even just a 20 minute walk outdoors
- Talking therapies or CBT if stress worsens symptoms

The Gut Microbiome (Gut Bacteria)

The gut contains trillions of bacteria that help digest food and regulate gut health. It is your own unique ecosystem and is crucial for your health as it produces hormones, vitamins 70-80% of your body's immune cells reside in the gut, specifically in the gut-associated lymphoid tissue (GALT), making gut

health crucial for strong immunity. We know that a good diverse gut microbiome will also help improve mental health as up to 95% of our serotonin, which governs mood, is produced in your gut. In IBS, the balance of gut bacteria may be altered, contributing to bloating and bowel changes and affecting our mood.

Ways to support a healthy microbiome:

- Regular meals with as diverse range of good, nutritious food as possible
- Good amount of fibre from tolerated foods
- Yogurt or fermented foods (if tolerated) as these are full of good bacteria
- Some people benefit from probiotics (effects vary)
- Reducing stress, exercising and sleeping well can also help!

How You Eat and What you Eat.

NICE90 Diet

The NICE90 diet is recommended as the first-line approach for managing IBS symptoms. It focuses on simple, practical changes that most people can follow without strict restrictions. The goal is to reduce IBS symptoms while keeping the diet balanced and easy to follow.

Key Principles:

- **Regular eating habits** – Eat meals at consistent times, avoid skipping meals, and avoid very large meals.
- **Identify and limit triggers** – Reduce fatty, fried, spicy foods, caffeine, alcohol, and fizzy drinks.
- **Manage fibre intake** – Avoid wheat bran; choose soluble fibre like oats, psyllium, or linseeds.
- **Reduce gas-producing foods** – Beans, lentils, onions, cabbage, cauliflower.
- **Sweeteners** – Limit sorbitol and sugar-free sweets.
- **Hydration** – Drink 6–8 glasses of water daily.

Low FODMAP Diet (If Symptoms Persist)

The Low FODMAP diet is a structured approach to reduce certain carbohydrates that are poorly absorbed in the gut and can trigger bloating, gas, pain, and diarrhoea in people with IBS. It is usually considered after first-line dietary changes have not fully improved symptoms.

How it works:

1. **Restriction phase (2–6 weeks)** – High-FODMAP foods are limited to reduce symptoms.

2. **Reintroduction phase** – Foods are gradually reintroduced one at a time to identify individual triggers.
3. **Personalisation phase** – A long-term, balanced diet is developed, allowing as many foods as possible while controlling symptoms.

High-FODMAP foods to limit:

- Wheat, garlic, onions
- Beans and lentils
- Apples, pears
- Milk and soft cheeses

Lower-FODMAP alternatives:

- Rice, oats, potatoes
- Eggs, fish, chicken
- Lactose-free dairy
- Bananas, blueberries
- Carrots, spinach, courgettes

Best followed with a dietitian. Not intended as a lifelong strict diet.

See Your GP If You Have

- Unintentional weight loss
- Blood in stools
- Severe or persistent pain
- Symptoms not improving

This leaflet supports — but does not replace — medical advice.