



Talking to Your Healthcare Provider About Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

By: Sarah Quinton PsyD, Director, Behavioral Medicine for Digestive Health, Co-Director, Interdisciplinary Bowel Dysfunction Clinic, Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, IL. Edited by: Lin Chang MD, Professor of Medicine, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA

International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (www.iffgd.org)

© Copyright 2002, 2021 by the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a bowel disorder that includes the following symptoms:

- abdominal pain or discomfort
- changes in how often you need to use the bathroom (frequency)
- changes in the way your bowel movement looks (consistency)

Other symptoms may be present, and experiences vary from person to person. These three core symptoms must be present for a diagnosis of IBS. Often, people have undergone a number of tests and procedures before receiving a diagnosis of IBS. A healthcare provider can reliably diagnose IBS by taking a thorough medical history and with minimal tests.

Management of your IBS may be complex. There is no cure for IBS, and the exact cause is still unknown.

We do know multiple factors can impact an individual’s symptoms. Factors such as diet, hormones, stress, gut-microbiome, and your nervous system may all be important to consider. Your goals and needs for each visit with your healthcare provider may change. This depends on 1) the provider you are seeing, 2) if you are a new patient, and 3) how your symptoms change over time. We know that people with IBS do better when all factors impacting their symptoms are considered. Take the time to make sure you can explain all of your symptoms. Providing a timeline of how long you have experienced each symptom can help your healthcare provider determine the best treatment.

Having a good relationship with your healthcare provider can make a huge difference. This improves disease outlook and your ability to manage your IBS. Follow the *Quick Tips* below and use the *IBS Visit Guide* to make the most out of visits with your providers.

Quick Tips	
Before Your Visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Educate yourself about IBS and treatment options through trustworthy sources. Read IFFGD Fact Sheet No. 168 <i>Current Pharmacologic Treatments of Irritable Bowel Syndrome</i>, and other IBS Fact Sheets. ○ Create a list of questions that you have about your IBS and treatment options and prioritize them. If you run out of time during your visit, this ensures your most important questions get addressed. ○ Set goals for what you would like to get out of your visit. ○ Consider bringing a friend or family member with you. ○ Ask if it is possible to send your questions and goals to your provider ahead of the appointment. This allows your provider to better structure your visit. You will be given the opportunity to include questions that you may be too embarrassed to ask in person.
At Your Visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Consider giving your provider the list of questions and goals (noted above) you have created. ○ Explain the symptoms that you are experiencing in detail and how they affect your quality of life. ○ Mention any factors (e.g., diet, stress, mood) you think may be impacting your IBS. Ask for referrals if that particular provider does not work with those symptoms. ○ Mention any tests or procedures you have had completed or better yet, bring these test results. ○ Tell your provider all medications, supplements, and vitamins that you are taking including dosage. This includes any changes that have been made since your last visit.
After Your Visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Make sure that you have received copies of referrals, prescriptions, or information either on paper or via the patient portal. ○ Try to make follow-up appointments that you need before you leave. ○ Follow the recommendations which you have agreed on during your visit. ○ Stay in contact with your healthcare team in between visits. This can be simple updates on your health to follow-up questions regarding your treatment plan.

IBS VISIT GUIDE

My goals for today's visit:

Think about what you would like to accomplish most during your visit. Many provider visits can be time limited. It is important to understand that one larger goal (such as coming up with a comprehensive treatment plan) may take up an entire visit. Three smaller goals may be achievable in one visit (such as "are there specific exercises I can do?").

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Symptoms I have been experiencing:

Think of your symptoms over the past three months. If this is too difficult to remember, try to think of your symptoms over the last month. You may want to ask a friend or family member to help you with this section.

- Abdominal pain or discomfort
- Bloating or Distension
- Urgency to use the bathroom
- Constipation or hard stools
- Symptoms during the night
- Gas
- Diarrhea or soft stools
- Fecal Incontinence
- Other _____
- Changes in your bowel movements (texture or consistency)
- Changes in how often you go to the bathroom (frequency)
- Other _____

Abdominal Pain Rating:

Over the past month how would you rate your pain level (on average)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No Pain		Moderate pain				Severe Pain			

Treatment:

If you have seen this provider before, have you noticed any of the following changes in symptoms since your last visit?

- Better
- No change
- Worse

Explain:

Factors:

Over the past month have you noticed a change in any of the following factors? These may or may not be related to your IBS, but your doctor may want to know about them. It is also important to note that certain factors may influence your symptoms but are not a cause of your IBS. This includes your level of stress and your mood.

- Diet
- Stress
- Mood (worried, sad, etc.)
- Hormonal changes (e.g., menstruation, birth control pill)
- Recent illness or infection
- Other _____

Medications:

List any medications you are currently taking to ensure your healthcare provider has a complete list. This should include prescription, over the counter, vitamin, and supplement medications. If you have stopped any medications, include those as well.

Medication

Dosage

Frequency

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

IBS VISIT GUIDE

Questions I have:

Write down any questions you have. List them from most important to least important and use the space below to write down any answers.

Question:	Answer:
Question:	Answer:
Question:	Answer:

Notes:

Before I leave today's visit:

- Do I understand everything discussed today?
- Do I know how to contact my provider in case I have follow-up questions?
- Do I have a list of prescriptions made today?
- Do I have a copy of referrals made today?
- Do I have copies of important information or documents that I need before I leave?

About IFFGD

The International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org, www.aboutIBS.org, or youandconstipation.org.

About the Publication

Opinions expressed are an author's own and not necessarily those of the International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). IFFGD does not guarantee or endorse any product in this publication or any claim made by an author and disclaims all liability relating thereto. This article is in no way intended to replace the knowledge or diagnosis of your doctor. We advise seeing a physician whenever a health problem arises requiring an expert's care.

For more information, or permission to reprint this article, contact IFFGD by phone at 414-964-1799 or by email at iffgd@iffgd.org
This Fact Sheet is being provided in part, by Allergan and Ironwood Pharmaceuticals, and donors of IFFGD.