

Recommendations to Manage IBS

DAWN HARRIS SHERLING M.D.

IBS is not one disease. It's what is referred to as a "waste basket diagnosis" in medicine. It means that when people say they have troubles with their bowels and they are worked up for everything else, if nothing else pans out, you get the diagnosis of IBS. Unfortunately, what that means is that what works for one person may not work for another, because the reason you are suffering may not be the same reason that someone else is. Still, a few basic principles seem to hold for most patients struggling with IBS:

First, and most importantly, IBS isn't your fault and you didn't bring this on yourself. It's a diagnosis that is increasing in the US and around the world. That's a failure of public health, not a personal failing.

Second, it is not all, or even mostly, in your head. While stress can contribute to IBS symptoms and having IBS can certainly contribute to stress, for most, IBS is a result of having a disordered microbiome (the trillions of microorganisms that live in our intestines).

Lastly, if you don't consistently react to certain foods, real food may not be at the root of your problem. For some, lactose intolerance, gluten sensitivity, or having trouble with so-called FODMAPs (certain foods that can be hard for some guts to break down), may be contributing to IBS symptoms. But for up to 50% of people, this is not the case. For many, the mystery of why sometimes a certain item bothers their system and other times it doesn't, is rooted in what additives the ultra-processed product has in it, not in the actual food itself. So, it's not necessarily the ice-cream, but what's been added to it. It isn't the bread, but the non-bread ingredients used to make it last longer on the shelf. By getting rid of the additives listed below (something IBS sufferers who aren't finding relief should do), you can improve a great deal.

#1 Eliminate emulsifiers (which have been shown to disrupt the lining of our guts) and other additives that have been shown to shift the make-up of our bacteria to less friendly types. The following additives should be avoided:

Acacia gum, agar-agar, carrageenan, cellulose, cellulose gum (carboxymethylcellulose), carob bean gum, di- and mono-glycerides, high fructose corn syrup, gellan gum, glycerol, guar gum, inulin (chicory root fiber), locust bean gum, maltodextrin, mannitol, modified (fill-in-the-blank) starch, polysorbate 60 or 80, sorbitol, soy or sunflower lecithin, stevia, sucralose, titanium dioxide, xanthan gum, xylitol

Importantly: You do not have to avoid foods in which some of these substances occur naturally. Cellulose, when in whole fruits and vegetables, is great. But if you see these listed in ingredient lists, best to put the item back on the shelf.

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#2 Add back the good stuff. A whole foods-based diet is best to encourage the growth of good gut bacteria. That means eating food that looks like it did when it came out of the ground or out of the animal it came from (you can keep to a vegan or vegetarian diet if that is your preference, but you don't have to if it isn't). Processed foods are okay too, but make sure that they aren't the only thing you are eating and that they don't contain the additives above (which would make them what scientists call "ultra-processed"). Examples of a whole food-based day would be a bowl of oatmeal with fruit in the morning, a mid-morning snack of mixed nuts, hearty chicken and vegetable soup with a piece of bread (just water, yeast, flour, and salt is a simple white bread), and green salad on the side for lunch (no bottled dressing—oil and vinegar/lemon), and a piece of fish with roasted potatoes and vegetables for dinner. And don't forget an additive-free dessert if you like something sweet at the end of your day! The Mediterranean Diet has been shown to have health benefits and is similar to the example listed above if you want a specific eating plan. But any traditional diet tends to be whole foods-based, so you can pick any one you like or mix and match.

#3 Build a better biome. Adding fermented foods, like real yogurt or kefir, kombucha, kimchi, or other "living" foods has been shown to build a more gut-friendly microbiome. While some people prefer to take probiotic supplements, the diversity of organisms and their ability to stay alive on the journey through your gut, can't be beat when eating real fermented foods.

#4 If you have constipation, you can also consider eliminating constipating foods, like white breads and rice and adding some bowel movers like prunes (or prune juice) and kiwi. Magnesium supplements may also help, but start slowly as these can be very powerful—the powdered version that is mixed in water seems to work best.

#5 If you have diarrhea or loose stools, eat white breads (without additives!), rice and bananas and stay away from things that can move your bowels like coffee and juices.

More Resources: DawnHarrisSherling.com

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