4 Tips to Help You Craft the Perfect IBS Diet

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Tips for Creating an IBS Diet Plan

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) affects up to 15% of Americans, making it the number one disorder diagnosed by doctors who specialize on your gut and digestive tract health.

Because this extremely common disorder, and its symptoms of diarrhea, constipation, bloating and cramping, affects your digestive tract, people have long wondered: Can diet play a role in IBS risks and IBS symptom management?

The answer, in short, is yes!

What Causes IBS?

IBS has a wide range of both physical, as well as emotional/mental, factors that may prompt its occurrence. On the physical side, there are aspects like food motility (food moving too slowly, or too quickly, through your digestive tract), genetics and gut bacteria. On the emotional/mental frontier, things like stress or anxiety can also provoke IBS symptoms.

Diet, interestingly, may be one of the most powerful lifestyle factors within your control that can help to ease, or even completely eliminate, your symptoms of IBS.

"In recent years, dietary management has shown promise as a key tool in the treatment of irritable bowel syndrome," concludes a 2017 report published in the World Journal of Gastroenterology. This report, along with University of Michigan research that claims to be the world's largest study on IBS and diet, offers key findings that may help provide you with hope, guidance and relief.

No Matter the Diet, Remember the Timing

How often do you catch yourself scarfing down your meal while multitasking, whether it is getting the kids ready for school or driving to a work meeting? How often are you so busy that you skip a meal, and then you over-indulge in the next meal?

Many people with IBS find that their bodies react better to their food when they slow down and eat smaller, more frequent meals. This may be because IBS can be triggered by how quickly, or how slowly, food enters and moves through your digestive tract.

A powerful way to manage your IBS symptoms through slower eating is by practicing mindful eating. Mindful eating helps you to become more aware of your hunger and your fullness and encourages you to slow down your meals, which in turn has been linked to better weight management and improved digestion.

Mindful eating has even been shown to potentially help with the breakdown and absorption of carbohydrates and fats, which are two very common triggers for people with IBS.

To practice mindful eating, simply bring your awareness to your food. Only eat when you're hungry, not when you are bored or stressed or anxious. Chew slowly, noticing the flavors, textures and sensations of every bite. Take a pause between each bite. Be mindful and aware, and you just might start to see a shift in your IBS!

4 Simple IBS Diet Tips

Now that you have a better understanding of how diet and mindful eating can help your IBS symptoms, it is time to move onto some IBS diet tips to help create your own IBS diet and diet plan.

1. Cut the Fat

Reducing or eliminating fat in your IBS diet is often the most commonly considered diet change among men and women with IBS, and for the right reason.

Some kinds of fat slow down how quickly your bowels move, and can even cause gas retention, which is linked with cramping and bloating. Another type of fat may affect your colorectal system.

It's important to note that there are not very many studies that specifically look into the IBS-and-fat dietary connection. However, anecdotally, many adults with IBS report relief when they avoid high-fat meals. This is especially true if your IBS flares up due to how slowly or quickly food moves through your digestive tract.

2. Monitor Your Carbohydrates

Some people notice an immediate reduction, or even an elimination, of IBS symptoms when they track and restrict certain kinds of carbohydrates. The specific carbohydrates to avoid are known as fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides and polyols (FODMAPs).

FODMAPs are not absorbed well by the human digestive tract, and the bacteria that cause them to ferment in your small intestine can cause excessive gas production, abdominal pain, cramping and more.

According to one study, 50% of people in a clinical trial who were put on a low-FODMAPs diet saw major improvements in their IBS experience.

Low-FODMAP foods to eat for IBS include:

- **Vegetables:** Bell peppers, carrots, cucumbers, green beans, lettuce, potatoes, sprouts, tomato and zucchini.
- **Fruits:** Bananas, blueberries, citrus fruits (oranges, grapefruits, etc.), grapes and strawberries.
- **Protein:** Lean beef, chicken, lean fish, eggs, tofu and other soy products and lactose-free dairy and non-dairy milk (i.e., almond milk).
- **Grains, nuts and seeds:** Almonds, peanuts, oats, quinoa, rice and walnuts.

High-FODMAP foods to avoid with IBS:

- **Vegetables:** Asparagus, cruciferous veggies (i.e., broccoli and cauliflower), legumes (i.e., beans and lentils), mushrooms, onions, garlic and sweetcorn.
- **Fruits:** Apples, blackberries, dried fruits, fruit juices, pears, stone fruits (i.e., apricots and peaches) and watermelon.
- **Protein:** Lactose dairy.
- **Grains, nuts and seeds:** Wheat, rye and most nuts not listed above.

3. Drink Wisely

Getting enough fluids helps flush out your digestive system and boost your digestion while also protecting your gut health. If you have IBS, focus on non-caffeinated beverages, such as water, coconut water and herbal teas.

Avoid coffee, sweet drinks (including those made with artificial, no-calorie sweeteners) and alcohol. Not only do these bad beverages provoke IBS symptoms directly, but they are also stimulants that may stress your nervous system, and this mental/emotional aspect can also impact your digestive tract and your IBS.

4. Take Probiotics

Probiotics are supplements that help to populate your gut with beneficial bacteria. Some researchers believe there is a link between gut bacteria and IBS, especially because the gut bacteria in people with or without IBS is very different.

“Although probiotics seem to offer some benefit in IBS as a whole, the optimal approach in terms of which individual species, strains, or combinations to use, and at what dose and for what duration, remains unknown,” warns the World Journal of Gastroenterology.

If you have IBS and want to see if probiotics make a difference, the journal recommends the following: “Take it for a minimum of four weeks at the dose recommended by the manufacturer. If within the four-week treatment, the probiotic proves to be beneficial, the administration may be continued, although the long-term effects are not known.”

The Elephant in the Room: Gluten

Many IBS diet recommendations you may stumble across online or in-person try to address the elephant in the room: gluten and grains. And yet in many cases, this attempt to say “yes” or “no” to gluten falls flat on its face.

That’s because while many people automatically defer to the idea that gluten is bad for IBS, the actual studies that have researched this continue to reach conflicting conclusions about this specific food ingredient.

For some, avoiding gluten has led to a reduction in IBS symptoms, even if you do not have a wheat allergy. This is known as non-celiac gluten sensitivity.

For others, removing gluten encourages them to remove specific foods and its these foods themselves that may be affecting their digestion (not the gluten specifically). For example, wheat grains are a high FODMAP food, and it might be these fermenting carbohydrates that are troubling your digestive tract, not the gluten.

If you wish to experiment with gluten-free eating, and that brings you relief, trust your gut (pun intended). Just know that the research is still inconclusive, and what works for you (or a friend) may not apply to everyone.

Living With IBS: What More Can You Do?

Diet goes hand in hand with a healthy lifestyle. Besides changing HOW you eat and WHAT you eat, allow your IBS diet to guide you towards an overall healthy approach to life.

Try these proven IBS-reducing lifestyle strategies as part of your new approach to living:

- **Reduce stress, which impacts your digestion.** Consider deep breathing exercises, meditation, and yoga to help soothe your nervous system.
- **Exercise for 30 minutes a day.** You do not have to join a gym. It could be as simple as going for a walk with your dog. Movement helps food move through your colon and intestines.
- **Get enough sleep.** Not enough sleep can trigger IBS symptoms, and catching more shut-eye can help your body to regulate stress more efficiently, and heal your gut faster.

Finally, do not turn a blind eye to your symptoms. Many people never truly understand what triggers their IBS and what soothes their gut.

Make it a habit to track what you eat, how much of it you eat, and when you eat. Then, journal your IBS journey: When you notice flare-ups, and how you feel throughout the day.

Review these food and life logs regularly to see if you can establish any patterns. Both diet and IBS are intensely personal journeys and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to alleviating your symptoms. By tracking your own personal experience, you can discuss and plan with your doctor and a dietitian to find an IBS diet approach that works perfectly for you and your journey.

“Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food,” Hippocrates famously said. In this case, he was exactly right. Your food may be both the cause, and the solution, to your IBS. By making the right choices, you can find the healing you so desperately desire.