



IBS Self-Evaluation: How to Tell if You're at Risk

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Do I Have IBS?

If you have started suffering from diarrhea, constipation or stomach pain, you may wonder: Do I have IBS? It's important to distinguish between IBS and other conditions. There are some symptoms in particular that you should never ignore because they can indicate you do not have IBS at all and the disorder you actually have could cause serious problems if left untreated. These are called the "red flag" symptoms.

What Are the Red Flag Symptoms for IBS?

A "red flag" symptom can alert your doctor to a potentially serious medical condition; the red stands for "danger" or "stop". When a patient has bowel problems these red flags could indicate you have a condition like inflammatory bowel disease, celiac disease, or colon cancer.

The red flag symptoms for IBS are:

- Anemia or other problems found in a blood test
- Symptoms that began when you were 50 or older
- Blood in your bowel movement
- Fever
- Vomiting
- Symptoms at night that wake you up
- Losing weight without trying to
- A change in your problems, for example a new pain
- Use of antibiotics recently
- A gastrointestinal problem that runs in your family (eg: bowel cancer or celiac disease)

It's important to point out that although these are possible signs of other underlying disorders, they are also often harmless and you may still be diagnosed with IBS alone. If you notice bleeding, for example, this could be due to hemorrhoids rather than anything sinister, but because it is an "alarm" symptom a doctor may wish to rule out other causes, conduct further tests, or refer you to a gastroenterologist.

Some of these symptoms, including unexplained weight loss and blood in the stool, can be signs of very serious problems such as cancer, but please do not panic. Research has shown that even when red flag symptoms are present, the majority of patients do not need further tests and are diagnosed with IBS.

Evaluating and Tracking Symptoms

If you do not have any "alarm" symptoms but you are concerned that you may have IBS, it is very useful to keep a diary. When I keep a journal I record everything I eat and drink, all medications I take, and write a brief note about any pain I had that day or how many times I used the bathroom. If you are feeling stressed you may wish to write

that down too in case it is exacerbating your bowel problem, as well as any sick days you had to take.

This will let you see how long the symptoms are lasting for because IBS is considered a long-term condition. Doctors do not usually diagnose it unless the patient has been suffering for at least six months.

It will also help both you and your doctor spot any patterns. For example, if you notice you often have symptoms just after you have taken a certain medication this may not be due to any medical problem, just a side effect of that drug. For women, it can also help you spot any link between your monthly cycle and your bowels. For all patients, it can show you how badly IBS is affecting your life and prove to your doctor the extent of your suffering.

Coping With IBS Symptoms

In the short-term, you can try over-the-counter medicines such as Imodium for diarrhea and Miralax or milk of magnesia for constipation. Try to avoid large, fatty meals, and alcohol or coffee, and keep your diet quite simple and plain, avoiding spices or meals with a lot of oil.

It's best not to try cutting out whole food groups without expert advice and a firm diagnosis, but you could try reducing the amount of dairy or gluten you eat to see if that helps. A fiber supplement like Metamucil or Citrucel may help to soften the stool (as long as you take it with plenty of water) and a regular schedule for sleep and meal times can help soothe an irritated bowel.

When to See A Doctor

You should always see a doctor if you are suffering from any of the red flag symptoms listed above, even if the symptom probably has a harmless cause. You should also see a doctor if the symptoms are interfering with your everyday life or are causing you a lot of stress; perhaps because it is difficult to work because of the pain or you cannot drive very far without needing a bathroom break.

It's useful to be aware of your family history because you are more likely to suffer from a number of gastrointestinal disorders if a family member has suffered too. Disorders that have genetic links include colon cancer, polyps, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, and celiac disease. If you know that a relative has one of these conditions you should get your bowel symptoms checked out promptly because unlike IBS these disorders may cause physical damage to the body if they are left untreated.

If you have not yet been diagnosed it is sensible to see a doctor if minor bowel symptoms continue for several months or severe bowel symptoms continue for several weeks. If you already know you have IBS, then watch out for changes such as going from mostly diarrhea to more frequent constipation, or much more severe pain than usual, as these could mean you have another condition on top of the IBS that may need treatment.