What to Expect From Your IBS When You're Expecting

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Understanding IBS and Pregnancy

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and pregnancy can be difficult to juggle because changing hormones interact with your tummy troubles in unpredictable ways. Estrogen receptors in the stomach and intestines will kick into high gear, but other pregnancy processes can affect your digestive tract differently. Even women without IBS report more stomach issues once they conceive.

If you regularly wrestle with IBS, it's natural to worry about how you're going to handle it when pregnancy discomforts and limitations come into the picture. Your first step is to relax — you still have plenty of helpful IBS and pregnancy resources at your fingertips.

Can IBS Affect Pregnancy?

Doctors and mothers can agree that pregnancy will almost certainly affect IBS in some fashion. Unfortunately, it's nearly impossible to predict how.

You might find your IBS symptoms stop altogether, or if you're among the unlucky few, they'll get worse. In other cases, new IBS discomforts could replace your usual ones — but that can change from one pregnancy to another, too.

Despite its frustratingly fickle nature, IBS does take a few common forms over the course of your nine months:

Constipation Often Gets Worse

Pregnancy usually interrupts your bathroom schedule to some degree. Constipation is a common complaint, and can come on at different times and for different reasons.

A spiking progesterone level, iron supplements, and pressure from your growing uterus all put a stop to predictable bowel movements.

If your IBS is the constipation-predominant variety, problems can arise at the very start. If your prenatal vitamins contain lots of iron (many do), you may need to combine them with a stool softener or ask your doctor if there might be a better brand for you.

Morning Sickness Can Complicate Matters

Naturally, ongoing nausea and food aversions will add a new set of challenges to your already fragile IBS diet. Since these are some of the earliest pregnancy symptoms, you might face a dilemma as early as a few weeks into your first trimester: what do you eat when you can't seem to eat *anything*?

The best advice is to try not to worry about a balanced diet right now. Find out where your IBS-friendly food list and your arsenal of palatable dishes overlap, and stick to that.

Try not to let your stomach get empty, which can encourage more acid production and irritate your gut.

Anxiety and IBS Feed off Each Other

Your emotional balance is closely connected to your digestive tract, which is why IBS goes hand-in-hand with anxiety and depression. Add to that the ups and downs of pregnancy (whether hormonal or environmental), and you've got a recipe for trouble.

Stress can bubble up in different ways during pregnancy, whether it's an unexpected call for bloodwork or extreme fatigue that gets the better of you. You'll likely find your IBS symptoms flare or change around these times, and these episodes are sure to cause you even more stress. It becomes important to decompress your mind and relax your body at regular intervals to break the cycle.

Managing IBS and Pregnancy Without Medication

The good news is IBS, though exceedingly uncomfortable, will not interrupt your ability to get pregnant or carry your baby to full-term. The bad news is you may have to find new ways to treat the symptoms while you're pregnant.

Not all medications are completely off-limits during pregnancy, but many first-line pharmaceutical treatments for IBS are no longer good options. In any case, it's a good idea to get acquainted with non-invasive, drug-free therapies to ease any discomfort that hits along the way. Below are a few IBS and pregnancy strategies that may help.

Yoga

Whether you struggle most with gas, bloating, constipation or diarrhea, yoga can help. If you've never done it before, you'll be amazed at how different postures can bring about different sensations in the body; if you're a regular yogi, you may need to adjust your practice for the months ahead.

Yoga encourages deep stretching and relaxation that can slow down heart rate, calm the central nervous system and help manage pain. However, backbends, forward bends, inversions, and twists will likely be off-limits.

Look into a prenatal class for good guidance, or if you're worried about accidents, you can practice the techniques in your own home with the help of an online class.

Soluble Fiber Supplements

Fiber is essential for better digestion, and if you're not getting enough in your food, consider taking a gentle supplement like Metamucil. It has been deemed safe for use throughout pregnancy and may be the boost your body needs.

While you add insoluble fiber, scale back on dairy and meat — both are tough on your stomach and notorious for constipation. If you suspect a gluten intolerance might be compounding the problem, cut out all suspect grains to see if that brings relief.

Helpful Plants

Despite being "natural," nutritional supplements can cause problems during pregnancy, so it's never a good idea to try out a new pill. However, there are a few plants that are gentle on the system, safe for the baby, and have been proven to ease digestive distress at any time.

You've likely heard about the virtues of ginger — a fresh slice in a cup of hot water can be better for your tummy than any store-bought tincture. Likewise, fennel (the seeds and the flesh) has shown great promise for treating cramps, gas and bloating, which should earn it a spot in your kitchen.

When to See a Doctor for Your IBS and Pregnancy

Rest assured that IBS won't sabotage your pregnancy, but you need to make sure IBS is really the problem. If you have no history of IBS but start to notice constant cramping, bloating, and changes in your bowel movements after you become pregnant, you'll want to mention it to your doctor to rule out other conditions.

Digestive distress is generally not too serious, but in some cases, it's a sign of intestinal bleeding. If you have frequent bouts of diarrhea, your body may not be absorbing enough nutrients from your food, and dehydration can put your health at risk.

Luckily, acting at the first sign of trouble can save you from complications, and get you back on track to a healthy pregnancy.