Is Back Pain a Symptom of IBS?

by SOPHIE LEE

What's the Link Between IBS and Back Pain?

The typical symptoms of an irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) are those that you would expect from a gut problem: diarrhea, constipation, stomach pain and bloating.

However, IBS sufferers often find themselves struggling with a range of other symptoms that don't seem to be connected to their bowel, whether it's fatigue, muscle pain, problems with sleep, headaches or back and side pain.

It can be tough to say whether IBS directly causes these symptoms or whether you have an overlapping medical condition, as back problems and IBS are both so common.

This is also very common to find that patients with fibromyalgia have aches and pains, as well as digestive symptoms because of this overlap, it's important to ensure you get medical advice when you first experience back symptoms.

WebMD advises that you should always see a doctor if you're suffering from sensations of numbness or tingling, if the back pain is particularly severe and not going away or if the pain started after an injury or fall. Weight loss, inability to pee, weakness in your legs and fever should also be checked out.

Thankfully, most episodes of back pain won't be severe and whether they're linked to your IBS or not there are ways to tackle them. Let's look at the relationship between IBS and back pain, and see what the common symptoms are and how they can be relieved.

Can IBS Cause Back Pain?

There are several reasons why IBS sufferers might experience back pain, which is usually felt in the lower back and can be anything from a dull ache to a sharper, crampy spike of pain.

Trapped gas can manifest itself as a dull ache in the back, and if you feel bloated and full from constipation, this may cause discomfort in your back and sides as well.

If you suffer from constipation, it could also be that straining when trying to pass a hard bowel movement has put pressure on your spine.

Your IBS may also have left you more sensitive to all kinds of pain.

People With Gastrointestinal Disorders Were More Likely to Feel Back Pain

One research study found that people with gastrointestinal disorders were more likely to feel back pain than

healthy people. The researchers thought that this might be because these patients were more sensitive to pain in general, a state known as “hyperalgesia.”

What a healthy person might have felt as a small twinge could, therefore, be felt like a painful backache in someone with IBS, even though physically there may be no difference between the two patients’ backs.

IBS Suffers May Encounter the Phenomenon Called Referred Pain

There is also the phenomenon of “referred” pain to consider. Referred pain is where a problem in one part of the body is felt in another part – it’s “referred” to a different place and felt there.

This can happen with internal organs, so it may be that the pain in your back is just your upset bowel making itself known elsewhere.

Back Surgery is More Common in People With IBS

One clinical study found that back surgery was 50 percent more common in IBS sufferers than in those without IBS.

This could be because of the referred pain effect, mainly because the nature of the pain seemed to reflect the course of the IBS – in other words, a bad IBS day would mean a bad backache too.

Interestingly, one doctor found that his patients with bad backs coped better with their symptoms once they realized they were linked to the IBS and knew they did not have a separate back condition on top of their gut problems.

Finding Back Pain Relief

The best way to tackle back and side pain will depend on what is causing it.

Keep track of your symptoms in a diary and see if they correlate to constipation, bloating, or gas pain. If so, these IBS symptoms are the ones you need to address.

If you think a backache is coming from gas pain specifically, simethicone is the most common anti-gas medicine, and it works by breaking up the bubbles of gas making them easier to pass. You can find it under the brand name Gas-X, with an extra strength version available for those terrible days.

You can also buy Imodium Multi-Symptom Relief which contains simethicone as well as the usual loperamide. Peppermint oil capsules and anti-spasmodic medications such as Librax may be helpful to calm gut spasms.

Physical Activity

It may seem counter-intuitive but exercise, or at least gentle movement, is recommended for most back aches as people who rest too much take longer to recover from back problems.

You can follow a simple routine of stretches and exercise for your back to increase your muscle strength and flexibility. Losing weight will help to decrease the strain placed on your spine and walking, pilates and yoga are also recommended.

Yoga may be the first thing to try as many people recommend it for both back pain and IBS: the gentle stretches can relieve tired and tense muscles and strengthen your abdominal area, the breathing exercises can calm frazzled nerves, and the various poses can help to release trapped gas.

Painkillers

Ibuprofen and other anti-inflammatories can provide short-term relief but be on the lookout for their gastrointestinal side effects and take them with food if you can.

A hot water bottle or heat pack can relax tense muscles, although some people find that ice is more effective – use a pack of frozen vegetables wrapped in a tea towel. You can also try heat followed by ice or vice versa.

Ergonomics

If you work at a desk for any length of time making sure your chair has good lumbar support, your feet are firmly on the ground, and you have armrests.

Get up and walk around regularly; you can install a range of apps that remind you to take breaks at set intervals or use a speech-to-text program like Dragon Naturally Speaking to avoid typing altogether.

Massage and Manipulations

A chiropractor, osteopath or physiotherapist can help by physically massaging and manipulating your back muscles and spine and giving advice on posture, ergonomics, and exercise. You could also look into complementary therapies such as acupuncture which uses fine needles to stimulate nerves under the skin.

A TENS machine (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) can transmit a mild electric current into the body via electrodes placed on the skin. This can help to limit the pain signal being sent to your brain.

It won’t treat the cause of the pain but it can reduce the feeling of pain itself, and it may be worth a try as TENS machines are available for as little as $20.