

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

People with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) may have some or all of these symptoms:

- bloating
- constipation
- cramps and abdominal pain
- diarrhea
- gas
- nausea

These symptoms may be different for each person. What works for you may not work for other people. Try the tips below to help manage your IBS.

Keep a food, lifestyle, and bowel symptom diary

Write down the following items and how they affect your IBS symptoms (such as pain, bloating, gas, constipation, and diarrhea):

- what and how much food and fluid you eat and drink
- physical activity or exercise
- medicines and supplements you use
- stress, anxiety, sleep patterns
- hormonal changes

Keep a diary for at least 7 days to see if there is a pattern. Causes for IBS symptoms can be different for everyone. Some lifestyle factors (sleep, physical activity) can help manage symptoms while others (stress, anxiety) may cause your symptoms.



Healthy eating

Eat a variety of foods from all 4 food groups in [Canada's Food Guide](#). Aim to eat the recommended number of servings for your age and gender. Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day to help manage symptoms.

To improve your symptoms, try limiting the following:

Caffeine—Limit to no more than 400 mg per day, about the amount in 3 cups (750 mL) of coffee.

Alcohol—Limit or avoid alcohol.

Higher fat foods (such as fried foods)—Choose lower fat foods and use lower fat cooking methods. Too much fat in a meal or snack may make your symptoms worse.

Fluid

Fluid is important for managing the symptoms of IBS. Drinking enough fluid helps:

- keep bowel movements soft
- prevent constipation
- reduce the risk of dehydration due to diarrhea

Aim to drink 9–12 cups (2.25 L–3 L) of fluid a day.



Fibre

There are 2 main types of fibre; water insoluble and water soluble. Most high fibre foods contain both types.

Water insoluble

This type of fibre does not dissolve in water. It helps bulk up the stools. Water insoluble fibre can make IBS symptoms *worse* for some people.

Examples:

wheat bran, corn bran, and the skins and seeds of fruits and vegetables.

Water soluble

This type of fibre dissolves in water to form a gel. It helps absorb water in the bowel which can reduce diarrhea. It can soften stools to reduce constipation. Water soluble fibre may be better tolerated by people with IBS.

Examples:

oat bran, oatmeal, ground flax seed, chia seeds, barley, applesauce, pears, sweet potatoes, and psyllium.

Increasing fibre intake

It can take days or weeks for your body to get used to a higher fibre intake. Slowly increase the amount of fibre you eat and how often you eat higher fibre foods to prevent cramping, bloating, and gas.

Once your body adjusts to how much fibre you eat, try to eat about the same amount of fibre each day.

The following foods are sources of fibre that may or may not be tolerated:

- legumes and lentils
- nuts and seeds
- wheat bran and corn bran

Fibre supplements

If you can't get enough fibre from foods, fibre supplements may help. Fibre supplements come in several forms—powder, capsule, tablet or “chew”. Cereals, snack and protein bars, and yogurts, may have added fibre supplements in them.

Many fibre supplements are meant to treat occasional constipation. Talk to your healthcare provider if you take these products.

- Read labels to see how much fibre is in one serving of the fibre supplement or the food item. Take the amount that your care provider suggests.
- Fibre supplements need fluid to make them work. Drink the amount of fluid suggested by your healthcare provider or the amount suggested on the supplement package.
- Fibre supplements can cause gas, cramps, and bloating. Start with small amounts and slowly increase to the amount that you tolerate.

These fibre supplements may be helpful in managing IBS symptoms:

- **Psyllium**—a source of water soluble fibre, also known as psyllium husk.
- **Flaxseed** (ground)—a source of water soluble fibre, can be added to other foods.

The fibre supplement **inulin** may cause gas and bloating for some people. Inulin can be found in foods with added fibre or on its own as a supplement.

Laxatives

Use laxatives only if your doctor suggests them.

Fructose

Fructose is a natural sugar found in many foods. It may be added to foods in the form of glucose-fructose (high fructose corn syrup). Foods with high amounts of fructose may cause diarrhea in some people. Limit high sugar foods such as fruit juice, honey, fruit drinks, pop, candy, and other foods made with glucose-fructose.

Some people may need to limit the amount of fruit they eat at one time. If fruit bothers you, eat smaller portions. For example, try eating half the amount you usually eat.

Sugar alcohols

Sugar alcohols are found in fruits such as apricots, nectarines, pears, and apples. The food industry also makes them to use as sugar substitutes. The sugar alcohols sorbitol, xylitol, mannitol, and others are found in sugar-free foods, candy, and gum. Sugar alcohols cause IBS symptoms in some people.

Lactose

Lactose is the natural sugar in milk and milk products. Some people may have trouble breaking down lactose and have symptoms like gas, bloating, cramping, and diarrhea shortly after drinking milk or eating milk products. Try the tips below:



- Try foods labeled as “low lactose or lactose-free”, including lactose-free milk.
- Use lactase enzyme pills or drops when you eat milk products. The enzyme helps digest lactose.
- Hard cheese, yogurt, or cottage cheese may be better tolerated than fluid milk. Have small amounts of these foods with meals and snacks.
- Plant-based beverages, made from plant foods such as soy, rice or almond, are lactose-free. Choose unsweetened products that have added calcium and vitamin D and have been labeled “fortified” or “enriched”.

Milk and foods made from milk provide calcium and vitamin D, which help to build strong bones.

Talk to your healthcare provider to find ways to add calcium and vitamin D to your diet if you aren't getting enough.

Other foods

Some people have a hard time digesting some of the foods below. To improve symptoms, try eating smaller portions than you normally eat of the foods listed below:

- asparagus
- barley
- beets
- broccoli
- Brussels sprouts
- cabbage
- cashews
- garlic
- globe artichokes
- Jerusalem artichokes
- leeks
- legumes (dried cooked beans, peas, lentils, and soy)
- onions
- pistachios
- rye
- shallots
- wheat
- zucchini

