

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 symptom diary

Write down the following items and how they affect your IBS symptoms:

- 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

Causes for IBS symptoms can be different for everyone. Some lifestyle factors (sleep, physical activity) can help manage symptoms while others (stress, anxiety) may make your symptoms worse.

Pay attention to your symptoms and record them in a journal. Keep a diary for at least 7 days to see if there is a pattern.



For examples, check out ahs.ca/NutritionHandouts and search “journal”.

Healthy eating

Eat a variety of foods from [Canada's food guide](#). 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 daily, about the amount in 3 cups (750 mL) of coffee. Energy drinks, tea, cola, and chocolate also contain caffeine. Read labels to ensure you're not getting too much.
- **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 poop soft
- prevent constipation
- reduce the risk of dehydration due to diarrhea

Fluids are anything that is liquid at room temperature. Some fluids are:

- water
- milk
- juice
- coffee, tea
- fortified soy beverage
- soda or pop



Aim to drink 9–12 cups (2.25–3 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 poop. Water insoluble fibre can make IBS symptoms **worse** for some people.

Examples:

- wheat bran
- corn bran
- 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 poop to reduce constipation. Water soluble fibre may be better tolerated by people with IBS.

Examples:

- applesauce
- barley
- ground flaxseed
- oat bran
- oatmeal
- pears
- psyllium
- sweet potatoes



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. This can 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.

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 team if you take fibre supplements and follow these tips:

- Read labels to see how much fibre is in 1 serving of the fibre supplement or the food item. Take the amount that your healthcare team suggests.
- Fibre supplements need fluid to make them work. Drink the amount of fluid suggested by your healthcare team 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 (such as high fibre yogurt) or on its own as a supplement.



Laxatives

Use laxatives only if your healthcare team suggests them.

Fructose

Fructose is a natural sugar found in many foods. It may be added to foods in the form of glucose-fructose (such as 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.

Lactose

Lactose is the natural sugar in milk and milk products.

Some people have trouble breaking down lactose. They 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 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 team to find ways to add calcium and vitamin D to your diet if you aren't getting enough.



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. If sugar alcohols cause symptoms for you, try to avoid them.

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 (beans, peas, lentils, and soy)
- onions
- pistachios
- rye
- shallots
- wheat
- zucchini

Natural health products

Some natural health products may improve IBS symptoms for some people. Talk to your healthcare team before taking any natural health products.

Peppermint oil

Studies show peppermint oil can reduce IBS symptoms. If you want to try peppermint oil, talk to your healthcare team about how much to take.

- Choose enteric coated capsules and take 1 hour before eating.
- If you eat 2 meals daily, **limit** to 450 mg before each meal.
- If you eat 3 meals daily, **limit** to 300 mg before each meal.

Probiotics

Probiotics are helpful bacteria and yeast. They may help to keep your gut healthy. There are many different types and strains of probiotics that work in different ways.

Ask your healthcare team about probiotic supplements or yogurt products that may improve IBS symptoms. Avoid yogurts with added fibre from inulin. For more information visit probioticchart.ca

Lifestyle tips to help IBS

Exercise has health benefits and can help you poop regularly. It may help you to increase energy levels, manage stress, and improve sleep.

Your IBS symptoms may get worse when you are stressed or upset. Talk to your healthcare team if stress is a concern for you.

When to talk to your doctor

Talk to your doctor if your IBS symptoms don't get better with diet and lifestyle changes.

The symptoms below may not be from IBS and may need medical attention. Tell your doctor if you have:

- blood in your poop
- constipation or diarrhea that doesn't improve
- fever
- pain that doesn't go away
- weight loss without trying

For more support



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](#) on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit ahs.ca/nutrition.