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**PATIENT INFORMATION:  
IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME**

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## What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a common condition which affects approximately 20% of the population in the United Kingdom. It can develop at any age; the commonest group to develop symptoms are patients in their twenties to thirties. Women are twice as likely to be affected as men. It is a long term condition that affects the digestive system causing pain and discomfort in the abdomen and a change in bowel habit.

## Symptoms of IBS

Symptoms from IBS can vary from individual to individual, from an occasional nuisance to severe symptoms affecting quality of daily life. Signs to watch out for include:

- **Pain or discomfort in your abdomen.** This is usually around the middle or lower abdomen and is often described as cramp like. The pain may vary from a sudden, sharp discomfort, to a constant dull ache. The pain may ease after opening your bowels and may worsen after eating.
- **Change in your bowel habit.** Your stools may vary in consistency and the frequency can alternate between constipation and diarrhoea. Some people experience urgency to open their bowels, whilst other patients also get a sensation of incomplete emptying after going to the toilet.
- **Abdominal bloating.** A proportion of patients feel very bloated almost immediately after eating their meal, this can be associated with loud gurgling noises from your tummy (borborygmi).
- **Nausea and feeling full after eating only a small amount** (early satiety).
- **Other symptoms** that can occur include indigestion and heartburn, feeling very tired, backache, irregular sleeping pattern, regular headaches, frequency of passing urine and painful intercourse.

IBS symptoms can come and go; you may not have any symptoms for months and then may have a sudden flare. Symptoms are often embarrassing, but it is important that if you notice any change you seek medical advice.

## Causes of IBS

The cause of IBS is unknown, although there are risk factors which increase the likelihood of development of the condition. These include:

- **Post infections.** Approximately 10% of IBS cases are triggered by an acute gastro enteritis infection.
- **Stress.** High levels of anxiety are often seen in patients with IBS and can overlap with conditions such as fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome.
- **Bacteria.** Small bowel bacterial over growth occurs with greater frequency in patients who have irritable bowel syndrome and over use of antibiotics also appears to increase the risk of developing IBS.
- **Fungus.** There is growing evidence that alterations in the gut flora are associated with GI manifestations of IBS.
- **Protozoa.** This is a very rare cause of IBS and can be picked up by travellers who contract gut infections whilst in the Far East.

## Diagnosis of IBS

Your doctor will firstly ask you in detail about your symptoms and may examine your abdomen. They may also ask about your previous medical history and your family history. There is no specific laboratory or imaging test that can be performed to diagnose irritable bowel syndrome. Diagnosis usually involves excluding other conditions that produce IBS like symptoms. Your doctor may well want to rule out infections of the gut, intolerance to certain type of food groups (lactose/gluten), over growth of certain bacteria within the small bowel or coeliac disease. In patients over the age of 50, it is often recommended that they undergo colonoscopic evaluation of the colon to exclude more serious potential causes of a change of bowel habit. Sometimes CT scanning, blood tests or MRI tests of the bowel are

required. These will be discussed on their individual merits.

### **Treatment of IBS**

A number of treatments have been found to be effective for irritable bowel syndrome and these include:

1. **Diet.** Studies have indicated that up to 70% of IBS patients benefit from a low FODMAP diet. Symptoms such as urgency, flatulence, bloating, abdominal pain and erratic bowels are those which are most likely to be assisted by a FODMAP diet. For further information, please refer to the FODMAP diet advice sheet which can be found in this section of the website.
2. **Laxatives.** In patients who do not respond to increasing the amount of dietary fibre they take or a FODMAP diet, osmotic laxatives such as Movicol and Lactulose can help maintain a more regular bowel habit and reduce symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Newer medications such as Lubiprostone can also be of benefit in helping to soften stool, increasing gut motility and promoting spontaneous bowel movements. Often combinations of medications are required.
3. **Antispasmodics.** The use of antispasmodic drugs such as Mebeverine may help patients whose symptom profile is predominantly abdominal cramps and diarrhoea.
4. **Tricyclic antidepressants.** In severe cases of irritable bowel syndrome, a low dose of an antidepressant such as Amitriptyline can be effective in helping control the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome; these are often reserved for patients who have not had benefit from simpler treatments.
5. **Psychological Therapies.** There is increasing interest in the mind-body or brain-gut interaction as a cause of irritable bowel syndrome and this is currently undergoing research. Hypnosis and cognitive behavioural therapy can provide coping strategies for dealing with distressing symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome in severe cases, certainly reducing stress may reduce the frequency and severity of the IBS symptoms. Relaxation techniques such as meditation, physical activity such as yoga or tai-chi, and regular exercise such as swimming, walking or running have all been shown to be of proven benefit in reducing the symptoms of IBS.
6. **Probiotics.** Probiotics taken in the form of capsules containing 10-100 billion live organisms have been shown to have a positive effect in providing a physical barrier within the gut and reducing the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. These capsules can be purchased from any good health food shop and should be taken on a daily basis regularly for maximum benefit.
7. **Herbal remedies.** Peppermint oil can be useful, as can a multi herbal extract (Iberogast) but there is only limited evidence for the effectiveness of other herbal remedies.

This leaflet is for information only and should not replace advice that your relevant healthcare professional would give you. Please keep this information and use it to help you if you have any further questions or queries which you can ask Mr Bailey when you see him for consultation.