



By Dr Quah Hak Mien

The difference between an upset tummy and Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Many of us will get an upset tummy every now and then; this is usually due to dietary indiscretion. Medically, it is known as gastroenteritis, or food poisoning. Harmful bacteria in poorly prepared or stored food causes bowel infection leading to symptoms such as diarrhoea, abdominal cramps, fever, bloatedness, nausea and vomiting. A stomach upset usually gets better on its own with rest after a few days. Persons with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) typically have upset stomachs continuously almost every day for months or years. Each attack may be triggered by stress or a variety of food.

Common symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome:

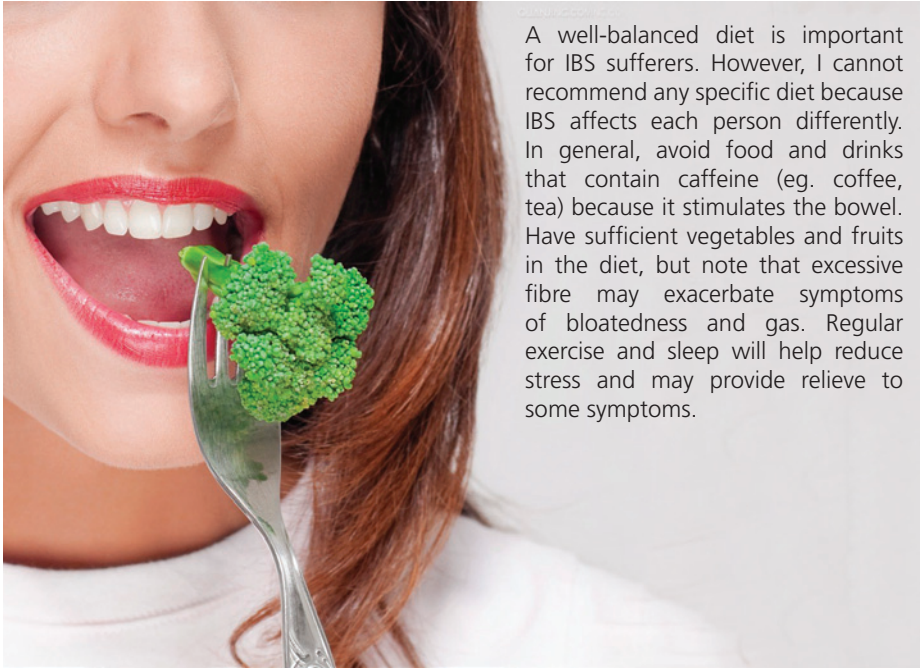
- Bloatedness
- Abdominal cramps or pain
- Excessive gas
- Diarrhoea or constipation

What causes Irritable Bowel Syndrome?

The causes of IBS remain unclear. IBS may develop after an episode of upset stomach or food poisoning. This is why some doctors believe that IBS may be a result of a bowel infection or the subsequent use of antibiotics, which may disrupt the balance of the intestinal bacteria ecosystem. IBS tends to start in the teenage ages or in early adulthood. It tends to affect women more than men.

What can you do to alleviate symptoms?

To others, the symptoms of IBS may appear trivial or funny, but to IBS sufferers, they can be very disruptive. Sufferers are frequently bothered by tummy cramps or embarrassed by excessive gas and stress-induced diarrhoea runs.



A well-balanced diet is important for IBS sufferers. However, I cannot recommend any specific diet because IBS affects each person differently. In general, avoid food and drinks that contain caffeine (eg. coffee, tea) because it stimulates the bowel. Have sufficient vegetables and fruits in the diet, but note that excessive fibre may exacerbate symptoms of bloatedness and gas. Regular exercise and sleep will help reduce stress and may provide relieve to some symptoms.

Medical help for Irritable Bowel Syndrome

The symptoms of IBS are similar to colon cancer and inflammatory bowel disease (eg. Crohn's disease, Ulcerative Colitis). An important test a colorectal surgeon would recommend is a colonoscopy to differentiate between IBS and these other serious conditions.

The goal of medical treatment is to relieve symptoms, educate IBS sufferers to help them understand their condition and facilitate their participation in managing their condition. The important thing to understand is that IBS, however bothersome and disabling, does not lead to a serious disease such as cancer. Symptoms can often be improved and relieved through treatment.



Dr Quah Hak Mien is a specialist surgeon at Gleneagles Medical Centre. His clinical interest is in the treatment of colorectal diseases. His scope of work includes managing a wide range of conditions including colorectal cancer, diverticular disease, inflammatory bowel disease, perianal diseases like piles, anal fistula, and anal fissure. He also has clinical expertise in functional bowel disorders like irritable bowel syndrome, constipation and faecal incontinence.



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