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What Causes IBS?

This is the question that everyone with IBS wants answered, "What causes IBS?" There is an answer, but it isn't nearly as simple as you're likely to find on most web searches.

The answer that you're most likely to see on the major stock medical websites is that there is no known cause for IBS. This is certainly true if you read WebMD, see your PCP, or go to a gastroenterologist. They are experts in other things, but definitely not IBS.

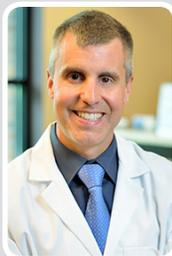
But this isn't true if you see a doctor who is an expert in IBS. Why not? The major difference is that doctors who specialize in IBS know that IBS isn't a single definable condition. It is a label for a broad spectrum of digestive problems, and there are many different answers to the many different issues that are lumped together into this very broad digestive syndrome.

This explains why there are so many different advertisements and websites that claim that they can help you cure your IBS. They are each looking at a small part of a larger issue. Like the blind men trying to describe an elephant but only touching one small part of it, they never get it right because the real issue is so much larger than what they touch upon.

Some of the so-called treatments don't address any cause, just a symptom. The best examples are drugs for IBS. Almost all of them are designed to force a change in your biochemistry or physiology that might change your symptoms. Rarely do they address a potential cause.

Others treatments address a possible cause, but there are so many different causes that the likelihood that you've hit upon the right one is very small. And most of the time people with IBS are experiencing the culmination of several causes wearing them down and triggering their symptoms. So even if you hit upon one of them, you may not experience enough improvement to realize it until you put the entire puzzle together.

Let's investigate some of the potential causes for IBS to give you an idea about how complex this issue really is.



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What Causes IBS? *cont.*

SIBO – one of the more popular causes for IBS more recently is known as SIBO. SIBO stands for small intestine bacterial overgrowth. The concept is that you have too much bacteria growing in your small intestine, and that this is causing you to not digest your food properly.

This is an interesting and potentially valid problem. However, it's much more complicated than it appears. The theory is that you aren't supposed to have bacteria in your small intestine. This is false information. Everyone has bacteria in their small intestine. In fact, you need bacteria in your small intestine.

It is possible to have a bacterial overgrowth that is causing your symptoms, and occasionally that is the case, but not nearly as often as proponents of this approach would have you believe. Testing for SIBO is also challenging and fraught with errors.

Probiotics – from having too much bacteria, to not having enough, probiotics are all the rage these days. Probiotics are the good guys, the bacteria that we need in order to have proper digestion.

Probiotics come in all shapes and sizes, and no two probiotic products on the market are the same. The big question is which one to take? And how much? And for how long? Your response can be very different depending on the answers to these variables.

The digestive tract is loaded with all kinds of good bacteria, most of which are not in probiotic products. The topic of probiotics is vast, and there is much potential value that can be had by using the proper probiotic at the proper time. But you're just as likely to take a probiotic and cause digestive symptoms as you are to take one and get better if you don't know what you're doing.

Fodmaps diet – the fodmaps diet is the latest in a long line of diets that supposedly cure IBS. Fodmaps stands for fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides and polyols. Say that three times fast!

Sounds impressive, doesn't it. Anything that is impossible to pronounce must be right, at least that must be the thought process behind this very complex philosophy. The logic that you can't digest these foods is incredibly complex, and doesn't make much sense from a scientific or biological point of view.

Yet a few people swear that it helps them. And no doubt it does help some people, but probably not because of the theory that proponents of this diet claim. It's mostly because they've accidentally stumbled on a diet that has pieces that just happen to be valuable to their individual IBS puzzle, but also causes them to avoid a whole lot of other foods that they can still eat. This isn't the first IBS diet, and it certainly won't be the last.

Gluten – the gluten free craze is huge, and that's both good and bad. It's great if you happen to have a gluten allergy. Many people do, but certainly not everyone.

It's also great if avoiding gluten helps you to eat healthier. However, it's getting increasingly easier to avoid gluten and still have a really lousy diet. More gluten free processed foods and junk food alternatives are coming out every day. So just because you avoid gluten doesn't mean that you're going to be healthy.

Gluten is only one of a large number of foods to which you could be reacting. It's a completely valid issue, but it's not any more important than any other food allergy or sensitivity. If it's not helping you, there is still plenty of hope.

Food allergies and sensitivities – food allergies, intolerance, and sensitivities are another potential cause of IBS. They are far more common than most people or doctors realize, and they can involve any food.

This is a very tricky subject because there are many different reasons that you may feel that a food causes your symptoms. It may be because you are truly allergic to the food, or it may be because you can't digest a particular food due to other issues that are weakening your ability to digest it. Or it may be due to a variety of other issues.

Correlating your symptoms to a certain food can be extremely difficult due to a variety of issues, and elimination diets are often very challenging to do. There are also many different kinds of tests for reactions to foods, and they are not all equal or of the same quality. This is a massive subject full of potential value, but few doctors understand it well enough to help you.

Fiber – fiber is a long time favorite issue in the IBS world. There has been endless talk about the value of soluble fiber vs. insoluble fiber. But which is best? And how much should you take?

Fiber can certainly help. But like probiotics, fiber can also cause as many digestive problems as it can solve. And most fiber products are also filled with other stuff that is not helpful to your digestive system at all.



What Causes IBS? *cont.*

The real question here is, are you treating the symptom or the cause? Most people don't need more fiber, but it might help them with their symptoms. So they try it. If it helps, then great, but getting to the root cause of the problem is a better solution.

Candida – this is another major fad with a lot of truth mixed with a lot of misconceptions. Candida can certainly cause digestive problems, and it can also cause you to feel very reactive to many foods that you eat.

Candida can be very difficult to diagnose, and the symptoms of having Candida mimic many other conditions, so it's easy to think that this is your problem even if it's not. It's also challenging to test for, so it can be very difficult for the average person to get a handle on. And many test aren't nearly as accurate as they claim.

Another challenge is that when you go online to try to understand how to treat it and what to eat or not eat, there are as many answers as there are websites. Everyone seems to have an opinion as to what you should be taking and what foods you should be avoiding. Candida is a potential player in IBS, but it's a very complex one. You definitely want to work with an expert on this topic when trying to address Candida in the digestive tract.

Bland diets – there are a number of bland diets out there for treating IBS. They favor very simple foods and avoid anything difficult to digest.

These types of diets sometimes help in the short term, but they aren't addressing the cause of your IBS. You don't have IBS because you eat lots of vegetables, healthy proteins, healthy fats, and complex carbohydrates. That wouldn't make any sense.

So the only reason that you may feel better on a very simple or bland diet is because you are making life easier on your digestive tract. You aren't addressing the cause of your digestive problem, and you won't ever get better and be able to eat all of the healthy foods that you should be able to eat. You'll just be managing the symptoms.

Gut/Brain Axis – this is an oldie, but not much of a goodie. The theory is that there is some kind of disconnect between the neurological system that supports your digestive tract (sometimes called your second brain) and your mighty brain, full of feelings and emotions, and that you need to treat that disconnect with drugs.

The idea that your gut went rogue and is now doing its own thing and must be punished with medication to keep it in line is a very poor theory, but it's been popular for decades. It's never been very fruitful, and advocates of this theory realize this and are now trying to hop on the probiotic bandwagon and call that the major influencer of the gut brain axis.

Your digestion can certainly be influenced by your emotions, but like many approaches to IBS, treating the symptoms rather than the cause is not a recipe for long term success. You may be able to gain some temporary improvement, but eventually the problem will resurface.

Yes, the neurological system in the digestive tract is large and fascinating, but it didn't cause the problem any more than having muscles cause you to be tense. Which lead us to....

Stress – stress is about the easiest thing to blame IBS on, if only because it's super common and rarely questioned. Too much stress and tension is definitely bad for your health. When is it ever good for you?

But lots of people have stress and don't have any digestive problems. It's not a simple cause and effect. If you do have IBS and then you get into a stressful situation, it's not unusual for the stress to trigger worse than usual symptoms. This doesn't mean that stress caused your problem, but it can certainly exacerbate your symptoms. And if your digestive system is already weak, then that is usually what will happen.

Treatment for stress, including **hypnotherapy** (another IBS treatment), can have positive effects. It never hurts to find good ways to deal your stress. But in most cases the stress is not the underlying cause of IBS. It's far more often the case that your IBS is causing your stress!

Summary

What causes IBS? As you can see, it's a complex puzzle with a large variety of intricate causes. No one theory is completely right or wrong. But make no mistake, there is definitely a cause. If you have a digestive problem that no one has been able to help you with, don't give up. Working with an IBS expert at the IBS Treatment Center, someone who appreciates and understands all of these issues, is the best way to sort through them and to piece together your own digestive puzzle.

