



Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) may be the most common gastrointestinal disorder. The common symptoms are bloating, abdominal discomfort, gas, and alternating diarrhea and constipation. IBS patients are also likely to have backaches, fatigue, and other seemingly unrelated problems. The exact cause of IBS remains unknown.

Dietary changes that may be helpful: Although increased [fiber](#) intake can be helpful in IBS, many IBS sufferers are sensitive to wheat in any form, including wheat bran.^{1 2 3} Rye, brown rice, oatmeal, and barley are high in hypo-allergenic fiber, as are vegetables and psyllium husk.

Some,⁴ and perhaps most⁵ people with IBS are sensitive to certain foods. However, these food sensitivities vary from person to person. It's beneficial to work with a nutritionally oriented doctor to find which foods cause an IBS flare-up.

Lifestyle changes that may be helpful: At one time, IBS was thought to be “all in the head.” Nonetheless, those with IBS aren't psychologically different from other people. However, stress aggravates IBS, and reducing stress or practicing stress management skills can be beneficial. [Hypnosis](#) for relaxation may also be helpful for those with IBS.^{6 7}

Nutritional supplements that may be helpful: Some young women with IBS experience worsening symptoms before and during their menstrual periods. You may be helped by taking [evening primrose oil](#) capsules or tablets containing 350–400 mg of gamma linolenic acid (GLA), the active ingredient.⁸

If lactose intolerance is the cause of diarrhea in individuals with irritable bowel syndrome, then supplemental use of the lactase enzyme prior to consuming any dairy products can be helpful.

Herbs that may be helpful: Enteric-coated peppermint oil capsules, providing 0.2 ml of peppermint oil, have been shown in some, but not all, studies to be an effective symptomatic treatment for IBS.⁹ Many people take one to two capsules three times per day, between meals. The enteric coating protects the peppermint

oil while it passes through the acidic environment of the stomach. In the intestinal tract, peppermint oil acts as a carminative (it reduces gas production), eases intestinal cramping, and soothes irritation. Peppermint may also be taken as a tincture in the amount of 2–3 ml, three times daily.

Chamomile acts as a carminative as well as soothing and toning the digestive tract. Chamomile's essential oils also ease intestinal cramping and irritation.¹⁰ It is often used for those with IBS experiencing alternating bouts of diarrhea and constipation.

Chamomile is typically taken in a tea form by dissolving 2–3 grams of powdered chamomile or by adding 3–5 ml of herb extract tincture to hot water, three times per day, between meals.

Supplements that combine an assortment of carminative herbs are often useful for IBS. A combination of peppermint leaves, fennel seeds, caraway seeds, and wormwood may be an effective treatment for upper abdominal complaints, including IBS.¹¹

Some persons with IBS benefit from bulk-forming fiber supplements mentioned above, helps regulate normal bowel activity and reduces the alternating constipation and diarrhea suffered by some people who have IBS.

Traditional Pharmacotherapy

I have had very good success with the use of very low doses of the tricyclic antidepressant *Elavil* (amitriptyline). I have used 10mg. two to three times per day mostly for the bowel sedation side-effects well known to cause constipation when used at higher antidepressant doses. Similarly, other tricyclic antidepressants may be used, and newer antidepressants such as *Effexor* may be used at very low doses to achieve similar good results with minimal or no side effects.

Are there any side effects or interactions?

The antidepressants may cause dry mouth, upset stomach, and constipation, but at the low doses used to treat irritable bowel these are generally not present.

Peppermint tea is generally considered safe for regular consumption. Peppermint oil, in large amounts, can cause burning and gastrointestinal upset in some people. It should be avoided by persons with chronic heartburn as it relaxes the upper sphincter that helps prevent backflow of stomach acid into the esophagus. Some persons using the enteric-coated peppermint capsules may experience a burning sensation in the rectum. Rare allergic reactions have been reported with topical use of peppermint oil. Peppermint tea should be used with caution in infants and young children.

Although rare, allergic reactions to chamomile have been reported. These reactions have included bronchial constriction with internal use and allergic skin reactions with topical use. While such side effects are extremely uncommon, persons with allergies to plants of the Asteraceae family (ragweed, aster, and chrysanthemums) should avoid use of chamomile. There are no contraindications to the use of chamomile during pregnancy or lactation.

No significant adverse effects have been reported with the use of fennel. Pregnant or lactating women, as well as anyone with an estrogen-dependent cancer, should avoid fennel in large quantities until the importance of its estrogen-like activity is clarified.

Short-term use of wormwood tea or tincture has not resulted in any reports of significant side effects. Nevertheless, consult with a health care professional knowledgeable in herbal medicine before taking wormwood. Longer-term use can cause nausea, vomiting, insomnia, restlessness, vertigo, tremors, and seizures. Wormwood is contraindicated during pregnancy and lactation.

Consistent, reproducible problems from taking [evening primrose oil](#) have not been reported.

Lactase in the form of caps taken with food or the milk that has been processed is safe and does not produce side effects.

Using fiber in recommended amounts is exceptionally safe – actually, the American Cancer Society recommends that we get 50 gr. of fiber in our daily diet, and our “typical” American diet may achieve 10 gr. if we try hard!

Checklist for Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Ranking	Nutritional Supplements	Herbs
Primary	Lactase (for lactose intolerant people)	Psyllium
Secondary	Fiber Evening Primrose Oil	Peppermint
Other		Chamomile Fennel Wormwood

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