



MEDICAL MOMENTS

Recognizing the signs of Irritable bowel syndrome

Irritable bowel syndrome is a chronic condition that affects the large intestine. Even though the digestive tract looks normal, it doesn't function as it should. Normally, the muscles in the intestines that move food from the stomach to the rectum contract and relax in a gentle rhythm that moves the food along in a fairly predictable schedule. But with irritable bowel syndrome, the muscles in the intestines spasm, making the contractions longer and stronger than normal. Those spasms are painful, and they disrupt the movement of food through the intestines.

Signs and symptoms

Only a small number of people with irritable bowel syndrome have severe symptoms. Some people can control their symptoms by managing diet, lifestyle and stress. More severe symptoms can be treated with medication and counseling.

Symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome vary, but the most common include:

- Abdominal pain, cramping or bloating that is related to passing a bowel movement
- Changes in appearance of bowel movement
- Changes in how often you are having a bowel movement
- Sensation of incomplete evacuation
- Increased gas
- Mucus in the stool

12% of the U.S. population

Research suggests that about 12% of people in the U.S. have irritable bowel syndrome, and it's more common among women than men and in people younger than 50, according to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

Risk factors

Many people have occasional signs and symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, but you're more likely to have the syndrome if you:

- **Are young.** Irritable bowel syndrome occurs more frequently in people under 50.
- **Are female.** In the U.S., irritable bowel syndrome is more common among women than men. Estrogen therapy before or after menopause also is a risk factor.
- **Have a family history of irritable bowel syndrome.** Genes may play a role, as may shared factors in a family's environment or a combination of genes and environment.
- **Have anxiety, depression or other mental health issues.** A history of sexual, physical or emotional abuse also might be a risk factor.

Clinical Trials at Mayo Clinic

At Mayo Clinic, the needs of the patient come first. Part of this commitment involves conducting medical research with the goal of helping patients live longer, healthier lives. Through clinical studies, which involve people who volunteer to participate in them, researchers can better understand how to diagnose, treat and prevent diseases or conditions like irritable bowel syndrome. Researchers are constantly looking for new and better ways to prevent and treat disease. In their laboratories, they explore ideas and test hypotheses through discovery science. Some of these ideas move into formal clinical trials. During clinical studies, researchers formally and scientifically gather new knowledge and possibly translate these findings into improved patient care.

Too often, participants in clinical trials and other studies tend to be overwhelmingly white and male. This lack of diversity results in "one-size-fits-all medicine" that's outdated and falls short for many patients.

As we enter an era of personalized or individualized medicine, we can only reshape health care by including all groups of people in clinical trials. Seeking out appropriate clinical trials is an important step to being empowered and proactive in your care.

Connect with others talking about managing IBS and living well in the [Digestive Health](#) support group on [Mayo Clinic Connect](#), an online patient community moderated by Mayo Clinic.