

Alberta Healthy Living Program February & March 2025

(Diversity, Mandarin and Cantonese)

Eating Well & Managing Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Introduction:

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common gastrointestinal disorder. Typical symptoms include abdominal pain, cramping, bloating, and changes in bowel habits from sudden onset diarrhea to constipation. These symptoms are usually relieved after a bowel movement. It is important to note that symptoms vary and depend on the individual, some can have symptoms every day while others will have symptoms occasionally. Research indicates that most people notice that their signs and symptoms occur within 3 hours of eating food.

Bleeding and persistent severe pain are not symptoms of IBS and may indicate other problems. If you have these symptoms, please speak with your physicians quickly.

What causes Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)?

Food does not cause IBS but may trigger symptoms. There is no specific cause of IBS, but many people living with the condition appears to have a hypersensitive colon. Several factors can contribute to IBS including genetics, previous gut infections like gastroenteritis, environmental causes, and emotional causes like worry and stress.

There are no diagnostic disease markers (lab tests) for IBS and often physicians make a positive diagnosis using criteria that are based on person's symptoms.

Before your health care providers, it is important to keep a food, lifestyle and symptom diary for at least 7 days to see if there is a pattern. Writing down the following items and how they affect your IBS symptoms:

- What and how much food and fluid you eat and drink?
- Physical activity or exercise?
- Medicines and supplements you use?
- Stress, anxiety and sleep patterns?
- Hormonal changes?

Causes for IBS symptoms is different for everyone. Some lifestyles such as sleep, exercise can help manage IBS symptoms while others such as stress and anxiety may make your symptoms worse.

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Are there specific foods that can trigger IBS symptoms?

Foods and drinks bother people with IBS differently. One way to know if any particular food causes problems is to write down all of the foods you eat and drink and record any discomforts. Eliminating many foods from the diet may result in a diet that is too limited in nutrients that could cause health problems. Consult with a dietitian to make sure you are eating a balanced diet and getting all the nutrients you need.

I was recently diagnosed with IBS, do I need to start a gluten-free diet?

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye and barley, or ingredients made with these products and it can cause IBS symptoms such as gas, bloating, diarrhea and pain.

If gluten containing foods appear to cause symptoms based on the food and symptom diary, it may be appropriate to try a gluten-free trial diet for 2 weeks to see if symptoms improve.

It is important to speak with a dietitian first before trying a gluten-free diet, to make sure you are eating a balanced diet and getting all the nutrients you need.

I have IBS, can I drink milk? Do people with IBS also have lactose intolerance?

Some people with IBS may also have lactose intolerance. Lactose intolerance is not the same as having milk allergy.

Lactose is the natural sugar found in milk and milk products. Some people have trouble breaking down lactose. They may have symptoms like gas, bloating, cramping and diarrhea shortly after drinking milk products.

Having a lactose intolerance does not mean that you avoid or eliminate lactose completely in your diet. There are ways to manage lactose intolerance by choosing foods low in lactose.

Milk and foods made from milk provide calcium and vitamin D, which help to build strong bones. Talk to your healthcare team to find ways to add enough calcium and vitamin D to your diet if you are not getting enough.

Are probiotics helpful for people with IBS?

Probiotics are helpful bacteria and yeast. They may help to keep your gut healthy. There are also many different types and strains of probiotics that work in different ways.

To date, there has not been enough research done to recommend a specific type and amount of probiotic for IBS. If you would like to try probiotics, they are generally considered safe for most people. As always, speak to your healthcare provider before starting a new supplement.

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Are there any diets that help lower IBS symptoms?

Following a low FODMAP diet may help reduce symptoms of IBS. FODMAPs are types of carbohydrates found in some common foods like wheat, milk, garlic and apples.

Foods that contain high amounts of FODMAPs may not be digested well by people with IBS causing uncomfortable symptoms like gas and bloating.

We do not recommend all patients with IBS symptoms to follow a full FODMAP diet as it is complicated and can be difficult to follow. Please speak with a registered dietitian first, if you are planning to follow a low FODMAP diet.

Are there any lifestyle related tips to help IBS symptoms?

Research shows that exercise has health benefits and can help promote regular bowel movements and can also help improve your energy levels, manage stress and improve sleep.

IBS symptoms may get worse when you are stressed or upset. Talk to your healthcare provider if stress is a concern for you.

Nicotine in tobacco may make symptoms worse by stimulating the bowel. If you have tried to quit cigarette smoking in the past and have not succeed, please reach out to your healthcare provider to get support.

What are some helpful tips for reducing IBS symptoms?

- (1) Eat a variety of food from Canada's Food Guide. Aim 50% of the food we eat includes vegetables and fruits, 25% comes from protein while the remaining 25% comes from grains and starches
- (2) Eat small meals and snacks throughout the day to help manage IBS symptoms. Avoid eating a big food portion in one sitting.
- (3) Reduce your intake of foods high in fat. Examples of foods that are higher in fat include high fat meats, Chinese sausages, battered fish, fried chicken, creamer
- (4) Try not to skip meals and avoid eating too late at night.
- (5) Drink plenty of fluids especially when increasing fibre intake. Aim for 9 cups to 12 cups (2250ml to 3000ml). Drinking enough fluid is important, it helps keep our bowel movements soft and regulate, reduce the risk of dehydration.
- (6) Reduce intake of carbonated beverages and beverages high in sugar.
- (7) Some people report caffeine and alcohol make IBS symptoms worse.

The current recommendations for daily caffeine intake is no more than 400mg, which is about the amount in 3 cups (750ml) of coffee. To note that some energy drinks, tea, cola and chocolate also contain caffeine. Reading food levels is important to ensure you are not getting too much caffeine. Avoid or limit alcohol, less is better.

- (8) Eat meals in a relaxed atmosphere. Chew foods slowly without gulping in air to reduce bloating.
- (9) Avoid eating too many products made with artificial sweeteners containing sugar alcohols (like mannitol, sorbitol, xylitol) or polydextrose as these may cause bloating, gas or diarrhea.

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How can a registered dietitian help?

A dietitian can work with you to help identify foods that may be triggering your IBS symptoms. They can also give you personalized advice on what foods to eat more or less of, depending on your unique symptoms. Your dietitian will create a step-by-step plan to implement these changes, while making sure you are getting all the important nutrients you need.

Any take-away message a dietitian can provide to individuals with IBS?

The bottom line is, there are no specific foods or beverages that cause IBS. One way to know if a food is triggering your symptoms is to keep a detailed food and symptom diary. Before you start eliminating foods from your diet, it is best to work with a dietitian to make sure you are not missing out on important nutrients.

How can Alberta Healthy Living Program help support the Chinese in the community?

- We have Registered Dietitian speaking both Mandarin and Cantonese who can offer one-on-one advice via phone, Zoom or in person meeting.
- These services have no charge and are covered by Alberta Health. You do not need a referral from a health care provider - you can just call to book appointment.
- All our programs and services can be accessed through one toll-free number: 1-844-527-1160.
- Better choices, better health (BCBH) for chronic disease management and BCBH-chronic pain that are offered in Cantonese, and they can register for this 6-week program (one 2.5-hour session per week) by calling one toll-free: 1-844-527-1160.