

Could your tummy troubles be IBS?

Approximately 10 to 15 percent of the population is affected by a gastrointestinal (GI) disorder known as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). About 75 percent of these patients are women. IBS can be difficult to diagnose, and the procedures used to diagnose the condition vary on a case-by-case basis.

“Unfortunately, there are no known biological markers for this condition,” says Dr. Ravish J. Mahajan, a local gastroenterologist with Unity Healthcare. “The extent of diagnostic testing depends on patient age and the predominant symptoms.”

IBS might present as pain in the lower abdomen, diarrhea or constipation. Symptoms may also come and go often.

Mahajan says that anyone experiencing these symptoms should try a few things on their own before worrying that it might be IBS.

“You may try (avoiding) dairy for 10 days to make sure symptoms are not due to lactose intolerance,” he suggests.

Mahajan also points out that certain symptoms mean the problem is *not* IBS, and need to be evaluated by a physician – including onset after age 40, blood in stool, anemia and family history of other GI disorders.

Officially, patients with IBS would experience symptoms three days per month for the last three months, with the symptoms starting at least six months before the condition can be diagnosed, Mahajan says.

“Other GI symptoms may include abdominal bloating, visible swelling of abdomen, increased gas production, heartburns, difficulty swallowing, early satiety, nausea etc.,” adds Mahajan.

Although IBS is characterized as chronic abdominal pain in the absence of any identifiable cause, a positive diagnosis of IBS isn’t the worst case scenario for a patient.

“Fortunately, in most people, the symptoms are



mild,” Mahajan explains. “Irritable bowel syndrome does not increase risk of GI tract cancer, and does not affect life expectancy.”

Treating IBS starts with dietary changes.

“Increased fiber intake is a cornerstone of treatment. Eating whole wheat or multigrain breads, oatmeal, etc. are very helpful,” Mahajan explains. “Patients should avoid foods that, by experience, they have found cause symptoms.”

Mahajan also suggests avoiding “gas-forming” foods including carbonated beverages, caffeine and refined flour products.

“Eating healthy alternatives, cutting down on red meats, regular exercise and good sleep pattern is important,” adds Mahajan. “Relaxation techniques, meditation, yoga and better coping skills may decrease symptoms of IBS.”

If dietary and lifestyle changes alone don’t improve the symptoms, patients may use over-the-counter supplements like Gas-X or Metamucil. The most helpful supplements depend on the patient’s symptoms. Other medication may be prescribed if symptoms persist.

And while there isn’t a cure for IBS, the first step to solving the problem is identifying the cause.

“Lots of current research is focused at learning the patho-physiology (cause) of this condition,” adds Mahajan. *—by Kristin Hines*