Irritable Bowel Syndrome
(Spastic Colon)

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is caused by a disturbance of normal bowel function. Other terms used are spastic colon, mucous colitis, and irritable colon. It does not require surgery, nor does it lead to cancer. There is no cure for IBS. But with proper diet, stress reduction, and medication, you will find that your problems (*symptoms*) will gradually disappear or improve. IBS is a common digestive disorder. It usually appears in late adolescence or early adulthood. Women develop it twice as often as men.

CAUSES

After food has been digested and absorbed in the small intestine, waste material is moved into the colon (large *intestine*). In the colon, water and salts are absorbed from the undigested products coming from the small intestine. The remaining residue, or fecal material, is held for elimination. Under normal circumstances, gentle, rhythmic contractions on the bowel walls push the fecal material along the colon towards the rectum. In IBS, however, these contractions are irregular and poorly coordinated. The fecal material is either retained too long, resulting in constipation, or expelled too soon, producing diarrhea.

SYMPTOMS

The most common symptom of IBS is pain. It is typically in the lower left side of the belly (*abdomen*). But it may occur anywhere in the abdomen. It can be felt as heartburn, backache, or even as a dull pain in the arms or shoulders. The pain comes from excessive bowel-muscle spasms and from the buildup of gas and fecal material in the colon. This pain:

- Can range from sharp belly (*abdominal*) cramps to a dull, continuous ache.
- Usually worsens soon after eating.
- Is typically relieved by having a bowel movement or passing gas.

Abdominal pain is usually accompanied by constipation. But it may also produce diarrhea. The diarrhea typically occurs right after a meal or upon arising in the morning. The stools are typically soft and watery. They are often flecked with secretions (*mucus*).

Other symptoms of IBS include:

- Bloating.
- Loss of appetite.
- Heartburn.
- Feeling sick to your stomach (*nausea*).
- Belching
- Vomiting
- Gas.

IBS may also cause a number of symptoms that are unrelated to the digestive system:

- Fatigue.
- Headaches.
- Anxiety
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty in concentrating.
- Dizziness.

These symptoms tend to come and go.

DIAGNOSIS

The symptoms of IBS closely mimic the symptoms of other, more serious digestive disorders. So your caregiver may wish to perform a variety of additional tests to exclude these disorders. He/she wants to be certain of learning what is wrong (*diagnosis*). The nature and purpose of each test will be explained to you.

TREATMENT

A number of medications are available to help correct bowel function and/or relieve bowel spasms and abdominal pain. Among the drugs available are:

- Mild, non-irritating laxatives for severe constipation and to help restore normal bowel habits.
- Specific anti-diarrheal medications to treat severe or prolonged diarrhea.
- Anti-spasmodic agents to relieve intestinal cramps.
- Your caregiver may also decide to treat you with a mild tranquilizer or sedative during unusually stressful

periods in your life.

The important thing to remember is that if any drug is prescribed for you, make sure that you take it exactly as directed. Make sure that your caregiver knows how well it worked for you.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Avoid foods that are high in fat or oils. Some examples are:heavy cream, butter, frankfurters, sausage, and other fatty meats.
- Avoid foods that have a laxative effect, such as fruit, fruit juice, and dairy products.
- Cut out carbonated drinks, chewing gum, and "gassy" foods, such as beans and cabbage. This may help relieve bloating and belching.
- Bran taken with plenty of liquids may help relieve constipation.
- Keep track of what foods seem to trigger your symptoms.
- Avoid emotionally charged situations or circumstances that produce anxiety.
- Start or continue exercising.
- Get plenty of rest and sleep.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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