



**Occupied**



# gut instincts

between **25 million** and **45 million** people in the united states suffer from **irritable bowel syndrome**. could you be one of them?

*by kate grip dixon*

**Bloating. Constipation. Diarrhea.** Whether we want to admit it or not we've all experienced these symptoms at some point. But if you feel as if emergency trips to the bathroom and painful cramps are ruling your life, chances are you could be suffering from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a chronic disease that affects between 10 percent and 15 percent of people in the United States.

From understanding IBS to learning how to manage it, Lin Chang, M.D., a member of the advisory board for the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders, and James King, M.D., president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, answer everything you need to know about IBS.

### Q: What is IBS?

**A:** “IBS is what we would call a functional bowel disease,” King says. “Bloating, diarrhea, constipation and discomfort in the abdomen are all symptoms.”

### Q: Who gets it?

**A:** “IBS can occur at any age, even in children, but it’s most typically found in adults ages 20 to 40,” Chang says. “It’s rare for older patients to develop the disease; most likely they’ve had a history of it.”

About 60 percent to 65 percent of all IBS patients are female. Although no reason is known why more women are diagnosed, Chang has a theory: “Women tend to be more likely to seek healthcare treatment.” Still, it is not uncommon for men to develop IBS.

### Q: What causes the disease?

**A:** “We’re putting the picture together,” Chang says. “But we know there’s a genetic predisposition to getting IBS.” Although the actual cause is a mystery, there

are things known to aggravate the condition. “Certain diets can make it worse, such as raw fruits and vegetables,” King says. “And 50 percent of patients report that symptoms worsen with stress.”

### Q: What are the symptoms?

**A:** “All of us have symptoms of IBS at one point [abdominal pain, constipation, bloating, diarrhea], but it’s a time thing,” King says. “Meaning, if you’ve had those symptoms for at least 12 weeks consistently, you need to think about IBS.”

### Q: How do you go about getting diagnosed?

**A:** “We don’t have an actual test like we do for a disease like diabetes. Instead, it’s based on symptoms,” Chang says.

“It’s also a diagnosis made from exclusion,” King adds. “You have to rule out other things first, such as colitis or Crohn’s disease, so it’s a process of elimination.”

If symptoms include blood in stool, unintentional weight loss, diarrhea during the night, then that tells the physician it’s something other than IBS, Chang explains.

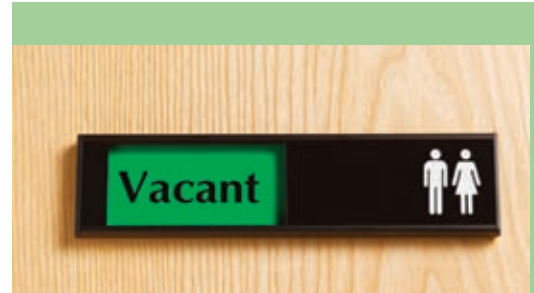
### Q: Is there a cure?

**A:** “There’s really not a cure in that we can put you on a medication and you’re cured. But there are ways to control the symptoms, including medication and diet,”

King says. “I usually start with diet, so if a patient is having a bad day, I ask them to think about what they’ve eaten in the last 24 hours.” In addition to raw fruits and vegetables, lactose is another food trigger, according to King.

“If stress is a trigger, make lifestyle changes to avoid or diminish it,” Chang says. She

also points to education as a means to help manage symptoms. “If you understand what’s going on in your body, you’ll more likely be able to better manage your symptoms,” she says. **v&v**



## talk it out

Although irritable bowel syndrome affects between 10 percent and 15 percent of the U.S. population, the majority of people don’t seek help, according to Lin Chang, M.D., a member of the advisory board for the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). “People are embarrassed and don’t feel comfortable talking about it, so they don’t seek help,” she says. “And often they feel there won’t be a fix for the situation.”

To get the help you need, Chang offers the following tips for getting comfortable with an uncomfortable situation.

**IT’S NOT IN YOUR HEAD.** “IBS is a real condition. It’s not imagined, and there are treatment options,” she says.

**IT’S COMMON.** Remember, you’re not alone: IBS is the most common functional gastrointestinal disorder.

**DON’T BE EMBARRASSED.** “Your doctor isn’t going to think less of you for having this condition,” Chang says. “They’ve seen it all before.”

**BE INFORMED.** “Visit a reputable website like the IFFGD’s,” she says. “Look for accurate information to help prepare yourself for your doctor’s visit and to get comfortable with questions you want to ask.”

## read all about it

Learn more about IBS and get the support you need by visiting the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders at **iffgd.org** or call **888-964-2001**.

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