

# Constant gut problems: How to manage IBS and reclaim your life

*Irritable bowel syndrome takes both a physical and mental toll, but doctors say dietary and lifestyle changes can offer relief*

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## WHY IBS IS SUCH A PAIN

Frequently bloated & uncomfortable



Makes you afraid of food



Need more sick days



Search for loos everywhere



Social plans go for a toss

## Don't confuse IBS with IBD or Celiac

**IBS is a functional disorder while celiac disease and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) are autoimmune diseases. Celiac disease is triggered by gluten and damages the small intestine, while IBD includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, which cause chronic inflammation**

lence of IBS in India to be around 4-6%. This is lower than western countries. However, given India's population of 1.4 billion, the number of IBS cases here is still significant," he says.

Dr Atre, 56, says he went through an exhausting cycle of trial-and-error treatments, including long-term probiotics and antibiotics, none of which offered relief. Then, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He first eliminated wheat from his diet, suspecting gluten to be the trigger. "Gluten is often blamed for IBS, but it made no difference in my case," he says. Finally, a mix of stress management techniques, intermittent fasting, regular exercise and meditation transformed his life.

"Intermittent fasting was a game-changer. I eat my first meal at 1 pm and my last at 7 pm, and apart from a morning cup of black coffee, I eat nothing in between. If the stomach is emp-

ty, there is no IBS," adds Dr Atre. His routine has dramatically reduced his IBS episodes from 10-15 per year to just 3-4. "I am off all probiotics and medications. But triggers like travelling or high-stress situations can still cause flare-ups." His advice? "Don't let fear take over. IBS can be managed with the right approach."

## NOT JUST A GUT PROBLEM

The intricate relationship between the brain and gut lies at the heart of IBS. According to John Hopkins Medicine, many IBS symptoms are linked to the hypersensitivity of nerves found in the GI tract wall. For others, it's because of how gut nerves interact with the brain, and how the brain processes that. People with IBS are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and stress-related issues. A 2021 study in Nature Reviews Gastroenterology and Hepa-

tology found that nearly 60% of IBS patients show signs of psychological distress. So, mental health significantly affects physical symptoms. It's important to look at IBS as a manageable condition rather than a disease, says Dr Vinay Thorat, a senior gastroenterologist from Pune.

IBS is tied to gut flora or microbiome alterations. "Healthy gut flora is diverse and non-reactive, but when disrupted by antibiotics, genetics or environmental factors, it can trigger subtle changes in gut function. This might make the intestines hypersensitive to normal sensations, like air passing through (the gut), which wouldn't bother someone with a healthy gut," says Dr Thorat. Despite ongoing research, the 'ideal' microbiome remains elusive. "Probiotics are often prescribed, but it is like shooting a lion in a jungle without knowing where it is," he says, highlighting the power of lifestyle changes instead. "Regular meals, yoga and meditation can positively change the course of IBS." And it's traditional remedies he bets on. "Homemade curd and daily turmeric are far more beneficial than commercial probiotics," he suggests.

## IDENTIFY TRIGGER FOODS

Research has found that following a low-FODMAP diet can reduce symptoms. FODMAPs are certain types of carbohydrates — fermentable oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides and polyols, as the acronym suggests — that often can't be fully digested or absorbed in the small intestine and are instead fermented by microbes in the colon. This can cause gastrointestinal distress. However, the diet is quite restrictive as it involves avoiding wheat, legumes, some nuts, certain sweeteners, most dairy products and many fruits and vegetables.

Experts suggest working with a nutritionist to identify specific trigger foods while maintaining balanced nutrition. Clinical nutritionist Dr Ruchir Lawate says managing IBS doesn't mean giving up on enjoying food. "It's about identifying triggers and finding a balance," he says. For abdominal pain, he recommends avoiding spicy and oily foods. "Steer clear of high-FODMAP items to manage bloating. Constipation requires increased fibre and hydration, while diarrhoea might call for reducing fibre and avoiding lactose," adds Dr Lawate.

Even though there is no one-size-fits-all cure for IBS, it's ultimately all about balance and consistency. "Plan ahead, avoid known triggers, and don't let stress derail your efforts. With mindfulness, you can keep symptoms under control and enjoy life," adds Dr Lawate.

At first, I thought it was colon cancer. But my colonoscopy came back normal. Then began a whirlwind of tests — sonography, CT scans, pathology reports — but nothing made things clear. Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a diagnosis of exclusion; there is no single confirmatory test," says Pune-based radiologist Dr Ashish Atre, who has lived with this widespread yet often misunderstood condition for seven years.

IBS affects around 10% of the adult population across the world, with a varying severity of symptoms. It's a gut-brain interaction disorder which means there is a disconnect in how your gut and brain communicate with each other. It affects the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and causes stomach cramps, abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhoea or constipation or both depending on what type you have. Since there is no real cure for it, most people have to learn to manage it through stress control, lifestyle and dietary changes such as giving up certain foods, alcohol and getting more sleep and exercise.

However, many people are embarrassed to talk to a doctor about it. Even those who muster up the courage find it challenging to get a diagnosis. "IBS diagnosis is purely clinical. It requires doctors to ask numerous questions and examine a patient's extensive personal data, including lifestyle, diet and stress levels. In a country where doctors are overwhelmed with high patient loads, the likelihood of missing IBS cases is considerable," explains Dr Uday Chand Ghoshal, national president of the Indian Society of Gastroenterology (ISG). Dr Ghoshal, a senior gastroenterologist from Kolkata, was part of the largest epidemiological study on IBS which had 73,076 participants from 33 countries, including India, and was published in 2021. "Various community studies have found the preva-