

# Health Tips for Parents

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## How can I help my child with IBS?

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a chronic disorder of the digestive system and is a common cause of recurrent abdominal pain in children. The specific cause of IBS is unknown but symptoms can be exacerbated by certain foods and stress.



Children with IBS have characteristic symptoms of abdominal pain (stomach aches) and altered bowel habits (constipation and/or diarrhea) that vary from mild to debilitating, says Laura Wozniak, MD, UCLA pediatric gastroenterologist.



**IBS symptoms have no identifiable cause.** IBS is a functional disorder, which means the symptoms are related to the way the intestine works, and is most likely due to differences in communication between the brain and gut, resulting in heightened sensitivity in the intestines.

**The specific cause of IBS is unknown,** although it tends to run in families. IBS can be diagnosed in the doctor's office through a complete medical history and physical exam, with no

laboratory testing needed. Children with IBS can have abdominal pain that improves after passing a bowel movement, or a change in frequency or appearance of stool. These symptoms occur at least once per week for at least two months, with no evidence of other disease processes that explain the child's symptoms.

**Children can develop IBS even if they are otherwise healthy.** The most important part of IBS treatment is learning how to manage the symptoms. Changes in diet and lifestyle may help. For example, some children may feel better if they avoid caffeine, carbonated drinks, and foods that cause gas, or if they increase the amount of fiber in their diet. Keeping a food diary can help track which foods cause symptoms. Medications and counseling are also available if changes in diet and lifestyle do not improve symptoms.

### Symptoms of IBS may include:

- Abdominal pain (can range from mild to severe)\*
- Altered bowel habits\*
- Constipation (hard stools that are difficult to pass)
- Diarrhea (loose or watery stools)
- Mucus in stools
- Bloating
- Belching
- Gas
- Heartburn
- Indigestion
- Nausea and/or vomiting

\* at least once per week for two months



## Help your child manage IBS

IBS can be embarrassing or even frightening to children, so it is important for parents to learn about IBS and help their child cope with symptoms. Reassure him/her that IBS is not life-threatening and help him/her avoid food and stress that may cause IBS symptoms, advises Dr. Wozniak. In some cases, it may help for parents to explain what IBS is to teachers so that symptoms can be better managed at school.