



Health Tips for Parents

APRIL 2018 | VOLUME 141

Irritable bowel syndrome in children

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a long-term disorder that affects the large intestine or colon. While there is no cure for IBS, treatments can ease symptoms and help your child get back to normal daily function.

IBS affects up to 15 percent of children and adolescents in the U.S., but the underlying cause is not well understood. “While there is no clear cause of IBS, children are at higher risk of developing it if one or both parents have the disorder,” explains Elaheh Vahabnezhad, MD, UCLA pediatric gastroenterologist. “Current research suggests that the painful abdominal and bowel symptoms may be due to a hypersensitive colon, an imbalance in the digestive system’s nerves, stress or bacteria in the bowel.”

Diagnosis and treatment

An IBS diagnosis usually means that a child feels chronic abdominal discomfort with bowel movements (once per week for at least two months) and those symptoms are unrelated to another disease or injury. To rule out other causes, your pediatrician will review your child’s health history,

conduct a physical exam and if necessary, order lab tests. “Based on your child’s age and condition, treatment may include dietary changes, stress management, over-the-counter medicines to help with diarrhea or constipation, and in severe cases, prescription medication,” says Dr. Vahabnezhad.

Ways to support your child

Hard-to-digest foods that are high in fiber, fat, dairy, caffeine or processed ingredients are problematic for some children. Monitor what your child eats and make a note of foods or drinks that set off their symptoms. “Stress and anxiety can also trigger a reaction so it is important to work on positive coping strategies,” Dr. Vahabnezhad says. “Talk with your child about ways to reduce their stress and try breathing exercises, yoga and mindfulness together during painful episodes.”

Common symptoms

If the following symptoms occur continually, your child may have IBS:

- Stomach pain and cramping
- Diarrhea and/or constipation
- Bloating and gas
- Upset stomach/nausea
- Urgent bowel movements

To determine your child’s condition and treatment needs, talk to your doctor.



How IBS can affect children

“Children with IBS are in no serious physical danger,” Dr. Vahabnezhad says, “but the symptoms can affect your child’s ability to engage in daily activities and cause emotional challenges.” When at school, for example, children with diarrhea may not get to the bathroom in time and face embarrassing incidents. As a result, they may dread going to school or stop playing with friends. In addition, some children may start eating less to avoid pain with digestion; this may lead to weight loss. If your child is struggling with IBS, talk with their doctor about ways to manage their symptoms and restore normal daily function.