

# IS YOUR BOWEL REALLY “IRRITABLE?”

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Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a common diagnosis frequently given to patients who experience chronic digestive discomfort. The condition is often characterized by symptoms of intermittent cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, constipation and/or diarrhea. It appears more commonly in women and is thought to occur in as many as 20% of the Canadian population. The diagnosis of IBS simply refers to the symptoms listed above. It does not offer any insight as to why the symptoms are occurring. There are significant underlying causes discussed below that should be evaluated in all patients suffering from IBS.

## Food Allergies and Intolerances

Both IBS patients and researchers agree that food allergies and intolerances can be major triggers of IBS symptoms. However, adverse food reactions are rarely assessed and identified in IBS patients. Since these reactions can be delayed from several hours to days after the ingestion of an offending food, the connection between the food and symptoms can be difficult to identify. Naturopathic physicians offer several options for assessing food sensitivity that may benefit IBS patients: blood testing for delayed food allergies, energetic (Vega) testing and elimination/reintroduction diet guidance.

## Intestinal Imbalances (“Dysbiosis”)

Dysbiosis is a term used in naturopathic medicine to describe an imbalance in the normal mix of microorganisms—called “flora”—in the intestinal tract. Alterations in the intestinal flora include overgrowths of yeast, parasites and bacteria or deficiencies of healthy bacteria. They can be present in IBS patients for years. An abnormal increase in the yeast *Candida albicans* is very common and can be triggered by using antibiotics or ingesting too many carbohydrates and

sugars. A detailed diet, medication and travel history along with specialized stool testing can help naturopathic physicians identify the exact type of intestinal imbalance that is present. Treatment of dysbiosis includes herbal remedies to eradicate harmful microorganisms and probiotic supplements to replenish beneficial bacteria.

## Stress-Induced Adrenal Imbalances

Another trigger of IBS, which is well agreed upon, is stress. Many people notice an increase in digestive symptoms when stress levels rise. Chronic elevations in stress levels can lead to imbalances in the function of our adrenal glands, which can trigger a vicious cycle that further diminishes our stress tolerance. Undiagnosed adrenal imbalances can be a significant contributing factor to IBS symptoms and can be readily assessed through saliva testing of the adrenal hormone cortisol.

Before a patient’s bowel is diagnosed as “irritable” the above potential triggers should be evaluated. Treatment of these underlying causes is often simple, potentially short term, and may lead to significant improvement in symptoms associated with IBS.

### References:

*About Irritable Bowel Syndrome.* US NIH Publication No. 03-4686, April 2003.  
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