

Solutions for Constipation, Bloating and IBS

Your digestive system is the most reactive part of your body. It is literally the border between you and the food you consume and is the true judge of whether what you are eating or drinking is right for you.

As your gut has more immune cells than the rest of your body, any reactions to what you eat can shut down the complex sequence that leads to proper digestion, absorption and elimination. This, in turn, can lead to constipation, bloating, intermittent diarrhoea and abdominal pain. If you've been to your doctor and they've found no evidence of inflammation (colitis or Crohn's) you'll probably be given the diagnosis of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). And these common IBS symptoms can often be addressed by resolving a simple check list of factors that should lead you back to 100% digestive health.

These are:

- Are you allergic to something you're eating or drinking ?
- Are you eating something that you cannot digest, but the bacteria inside you can?
- Are you lacking gut bacteria, digestive enzymes, water or fibre?
- Is your ileo-caecal valve not working properly or have you got poor peristalsis?

Let's start with allergies since this is the most common cause of digestive problems. To test this approach researchers at the University of York devised an ingenious study. They tested 150 IBS sufferers using an IgG allergy test and then gave their doctors either the real results or fake results, and a supposedly 'allergy-free' diet to follow for the next three months. Neither the patients nor their doctors knew they were on a fake diet. At the end of the three-month trial there was a significant improvement only in those people on their true allergy-free diet. What's more, those who stuck to it most strictly had the best results. Level of compliance, on the other hand, didn't make a difference in those on the sham diets. This study confirms positive results seen in previous studies. Lisa is a case in point. She suffered from abdominal pain after certain meals, constipation and bloating and had gradually been gaining weight and girth. She'd often become uncomfortably bloated after a meal. At a friend's birthday dinner she became so bloated her trousers split! She also had asthma. Lisa tested allergic to yeast, almonds and cashews, with a mild allergy to milk. Within days of avoiding these foods her symptoms started to vanish. Here's what she says: "People have noticed I've got my waist back. I'm in trousers I haven't worn for years. I am much less bloated and have had very few stomach cramps. I've definitely lost weight. I went out for dinner at an Indian restaurant and had no reaction . The digestive enzymes help a lot. My constipation has completely gone. I'm also using my inhaler much less – I used to use it four times a day, now none. One day I inadvertently had some muesli with almonds, one of my allergy foods. I felt itchy after that. I also had a yoghurt one day and felt stomach pain afterwards. But overall I feel so much better. " Although this wasn't true for Lisa, many people with IBS are often found to be gluten allergic.

Next to the common cold, IBS symptoms are the most commonly reported ailment, affecting as many as one in four people at different levels of severity. It is most likely to appear in late teens and early adulthood and is four times more common in women than men. IBS sufferers often have a history of antibiotic use, which might increase their risk of developing allergies or intolerances. Although IBS has many symptoms that come and go, the most common symptom is a crampy, colicky pain or a continuous dull aching, located in the lower abdomen. The pain or ache is often relieved after passing gas or having a bowel movement. IBS is also associated with constipation and/or diarrhoea. You might be given bran supplements, but these are rarely effective and can sometimes make matters worse. If this sounds like you, the chances are high that you have a hidden food allergy or intolerance.

To investigate this, I recommend having an IgG Food Intolerance test, which you can do with a home test kit. My favourite is Yorktest's Premium Food Intolerance test. Alternatively, contact a nutritional therapist to arrange an intolerance test.

Another kind of intolerance can occur from a lack of specific digestive enzymes. Some people, in fact most of us, don't make enough of the digestive enzyme lactase as adults and so can't digest milk very well unless they supplement the enzyme lactase, which is found in better quality digestive enzyme supplements. Others can't digest beans. Most beans contain certain a type of sugar called oligosaccharides that are difficult for the human digestive system to digest. The two most common are raffinose and stachyose. These oligosaccharides are largely broken down in fermented soya products (eg miso, tempeh, natto), hence not gas-producing. Tofu, made from the curd (oligosaccharides concentrate in the whey), should also be less so. But foods containing soya protein, or kidney beans, are notoriously flatulence producing. The solution here is to take a digestive enzyme containing alpha-galactosidase. Another type of oligosaccharide that's hard to digest is glucosides, found predominantly in cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage, kale, cauliflower, broccoli and Brussel's sprouts. A digestive enzyme containing amyloglucosidase (also called glucoamylase) is a wise precaution! All these foods, if not digested by you, will be digested by the bacteria within you, producing gas. For some people soya is the worst bean, because it contains protease inhibitors. These inhibit your protein digesting enzymes from working at full power.

In the case of soya, fermenting breaks down the protease inhibitors, hence making them easier to digest. Having a digestive enzyme that also contains protease helps to ease the load. All beans and grains also contain lectins. Lectins can be damaging to the digestive tract and initiate immunological reactions. Therefore it's best to consume less. One of the highest food sources of lectins is red kidney beans. Lectins are the reason why beans need to be soaked and cooked for a long time before eating. Fermenting also breaks down lectins. Provided the quantity is not overwhelming, a healthy digestive tract can deal with lectins. With ever-increasing quantity the chances of developing an allergic reaction grows. This is the likely reason why red kidney beans and soya beans are common IgG-mediated food allergens. Lectins are also present in wheat, along with glutenin and gliadin.

A good all round digestive enzyme supplement, ideally also providing probiotics and glutamine, an amino acid which helps maintain a healthy gut, is a great starting point.

While the digestive tract can shut down digestion and promote elimination when exposed to too many irritating factors (so leading to loose bowels) for some people the opposite occurs. Wheat, high in gluten, can be particularly constipating. That's why advice to eat more bran and brown bread often back fires. While the amount of fibre is important, the kind you eat is equally important. Contrary to the popular image of fibre as mere 'roughage', soluble fibre found in oats and chia seeds can actually absorb water and as it does so, it makes fecal matter bulkier, less dense and easier to pass along the digestive tract. This decreases the amount of time food waste spends inside the body and reduces the risk of infection or cell changes due to carcinogens that are produced when some foods, particularly meat, degrade.

The bulkier fecal matter also means less chance of a blockage, or constipation. Some fibres are much more water-absorbent than others. While wheat fibre swells to ten times its original volume in water, glucomannan fibre, from the Japanese konjac plant, swells to one hundred times its volume in water (glucomannan fibre is available as a supplement). Highly absorbent types of fibre not only bulk up foods, they can help to control appetite and play a part in weight maintenance. The soluble fibres in oats and chia ^[1]_[SEP]seeds are particularly beneficial. You can help 'bulk up' these fibres by having a bowl of oat flakes, with a spoonful of chia seeds, but letting them soak for five minutes before eating. These can help you become more regular. Chia seeds are really tasty.

The other critical ingredient is drinking the equivalent of eight glasses of water or herb teas a day. Avoid the temptation to use laxatives, except as an emergency measure. Even natural laxatives containing the herbs senna or cascara, are gastrointestinal irritants and, while they work, they don't really solve the underlying issue. Some remedies aimed at promoting regularity are concentrated fibre preparations containing things like bran, ispaghula methylcellulose or sterculia. I prefer glucomannan fibre.

It is very important to drink plenty of water if you are taking such fibre supplements. However, as you start to change towards a high-fibre diet even these may no longer be necessary.

Finally, it's worth considering if the muscular 'rhythm' of your intestines is working properly. Basically, if everything is working just right you should feel the urge after every meal. As the stomach valves open up this should trigger the opening of the ileo-caecal valve (ICV), that separates the small from the large intestine. You can find the location of your ICV by putting your thumb in your belly button and your little index finger on the protusion of your right hip. Your ICV is roughly half way between. If this area is tender you might have a slightly inflamed ICV, often aggravated by intestinal irritants – either something you're allergic to or something like coffee or hot chilli spiced foods. Ileo-caecal valve function can be restored by two methods. One is a physical technique or manipulation practised by naturopaths, some nutritionists and kinesiologists. The other is by eating a diet that is very low in digestive irritants for a couple of weeks.

In summary, in terms of what you eat:

- Find out what you're allergic to.
- Go easy on beans, soya and cruciferous vegetables and/or try taking with a digestive

enzyme containing probiotics and glutamine.

- If constipated have soaked oats and chia seeds, plus a spoonful of glucomannan fibre.
- Be careful about coffee and spices. They may not suit you.

Adapted extract from *Improve Your Digestion*, by Patrick Holford (Piatkus), used with permission.