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IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME - WHAT IS IT?

(Other terms which are sometimes used to describe this condition are **spastic colon** and **mucos colitis**)

Irritable bowel syndrome is probably the commonest bowel disorder treated by gastroenterological physicians and surgeons.

The symptoms are often a combination of abdominal discomfort, abdominal distension, diarrhoea or constipation. Abdominal discomfort is experienced by most patients at some time and can occur in any part of the abdomen, but most commonly is in the left side. The discomfort may be aggravated by food, and some people may have a particular food intolerance. Abdominal distension, constipation with the passage of small, hard, dry, pellet stools, pencil like stools, or diarrhoea sometimes with explosive defaecation may occur. Occasionally mucus alone is passed after defaecation.

The cause of Irritable Bowel Syndrome

The cause of irritable bowel syndrome is unknown, but some patients often show anxiety or stress, and in some instances symptoms can date back to the time of "food poisoning" or "gastro". Many authorities believe that the condition represents an exaggeration of normal function of the bowel with disordered or unco-ordinated bowel activity. Research into the cause of this condition continues.

Investigation

Irritable bowel syndrome is usually made as a diagnosis of exclusion. This means that other organic pathology must be ruled out, and to do so a variety of bowel investigations both in the office, laboratory department or endoscopy department may be required.

Treatment

It is always helpful for a patient to know that the condition is benign, and that cancer has been ruled out. In some patients treatment of stress related factors can also be helpful. Anti-spasmodic drugs may relieve a number of symptoms, but often have unacceptable side effects, and the dosage must be carefully monitored. Peppermint oil preparations have recently been shown to help a considerable number of sufferers. Constipation should be avoided, as should excessive diarrhoea. Appropriate medications can be used in these circumstances. The symptoms of irritable bowel may respond to such treatment, but in many patients they continue to wax and wane in severity, and sometimes spontaneously disappear.