Safe Food Choices and Diet Strategies for Those with IBS

by SOPHIE LEE

Foods to Eat With IBS

Almost all IBS sufferers will tell you that their diet affects their symptoms, but it can be tricky to identify exactly which foods are harming you and which are helping. Let's take a look at what you should be eating when your bowel is in an irritable mood and what foods you should be staying away from.

What Is a Healthy Diet for IBS?

Unfortunately, there is no one, set diet that will help everyone who suffers from IBS. This is partly because the disorder is not fully understood, but it's also because we suffer in different ways — your biggest issue might be diarrhea in the morning, whereas mine might be pain and bloating.

Having said that, there are some well-known "trigger" foods that tend to upset even the calmest of stomachs, so let's look at those first.

Common Trigger Foods

Coffee and other drinks that contain caffeine can cause diarrhea. Energy drinks are a big culprit here as they can hide high levels of caffeine without you realising. Try to limit caffeinated drinks to once a day, or switch to tea which is lower in caffeine (or herbal tea which has none at all).

Alcohol should also be avoided as it can set off IBS-D and cause pain. Carbonated soft drinks and sodas can increase bloating and trapped gas, and any food that contains an artificial sweetener like sorbitol can have laxative effects (check the ingredients list of chewing gum, candy and sodas).

Spicy foods are likely to be tough to digest for a sensitive bowel, because the capsaicin in ingredients like chili speeds up movement of waste in the gut and creates that burning sensation. Onion and garlic may also be a problem. Fatty foods can also trigger symptoms, so fried foods and burgers dripping in oil are off the menu, and I'm afraid some people have trouble with both chocolate and nuts.

Basic Safe Foods

Although there's no standard diet that's prescribed for IBS, there are some foods to eat with IBS that are considered generally safe for most people. Chicken and fish are usually recommended, for example. Rice and corn won't often cause problems and lower-fat versions of dairy foods and leaner versions of meat may be easier to tolerate.

Cut down on oil by using a cooking spray instead, or, grill and steam your meals rather than fry them. Peeled fruits can be easier to digest than fruits with the skin on. Water is of course the safest drink of all, but many people can drink herbal teas and fruit juices with no issues, although too much fruit juice in a day may cause diarrhea

and gas if you're sensitive to it.

Different Diet Approaches

Regarding foods to eat with IBS in general, the low FODMAP diet has helped many people by letting them cut down on carbohydrates that some people find difficult to digest. Foods that are high in these carbs like onions, wheat milk and apples are replaced by low FODMAP foods like carrots, wheat-free bread, rice milk and bananas.

Don't worry if that sounds too daunting — the diet is designed to be strict at first and then relaxed later to check which foods you are most affected by, so you won't need to follow the strictest version forever.

It's also a good idea to have a registered dietitian help you get to grips with the diet, as you will need a detailed list of low and high-FODMAP foods and guidelines to prevent you from missing out on important vitamins and minerals.

Some doctors advise using an "exclusion" diet to cut out certain foods for a period of time to see if you feel better. Gluten and dairy are the two most common food groups to be cut out and can be replaced by gluten-free or dairy-free alternatives like rice, corn, almond milk and tofu.

If you're trying an exclusion diet, make sure you only cut out one food group at a time, so you know what is working and don't suddenly reduce your intake of nutrients. Anyone following an exclusion diet should be aware of the vitamins and minerals they might become deficient in. For example, a dairy-free diet could result in low calcium levels, so supplements may be needed in the long-term.

My Own IBS Diet

Like most IBS patients, I have had to use trial and error to find a diet that works for me, but in general, I use a gluten-free diet to keep my constipation-predominant IBS under control. I avoid alcohol and coffee and find that soluble fiber (taken with plenty of water) definitely helps keep things running smoothly.

You can increase your soluble fiber intake by either using a supplement like Citrucel or Metamucil or eating more fiber-rich foods like beans, oats, apples, peas and potatoes. A generic version of Metamucil is available cheaply in health food shops; ask for "psyllium" fiber, a natural product which is made from plant seeds.

Some studies have shown that insoluble fiber (the kind that doesn't dissolve in water) can make IBS symptoms worse, so be careful if you're eating bran for your breakfast cereal or loading up on whole-wheat bread.

Finally, it's also worth sticking to as regular a schedule of meals as you can manage. Just as we sleep better on a regular schedule, our guts function better when they have a predictable intake of food and don't have to deal with irregular eating or a tiny meal in the morning and a massive one at night. My own IBS is much calmer if I eat and sleep at regular times.