



## Irritable Bowel Syndrome and the Pelvic Floor

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### Key Ideas

- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is common in people who have pelvic pain.
- People with IBS commonly have an “overactive” pelvic floor. This means the muscles are tense and contracted, even at rest.
- IBS happens when the gut and the brain do not communicate properly.
- The two most important aspects of recovery process for IBS include (1) crafting a good stool, and (2) calming the nervous system.

### Irritable Bowel Syndrome

#### What is irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)?

- IBS is defined as abdominal pain at least 1 day per week for at least 3 months. Pain is associated with bowel movements. There is also change in frequency of bowel movements. The stool shape (form) can also change.

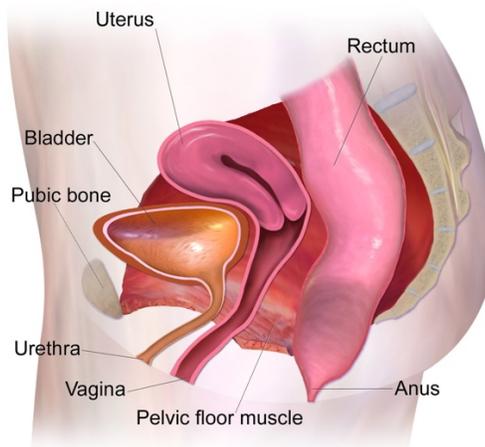
#### What can cause IBS?

- IBS occurs when the gut and the spinal cord and brain (central nervous system) do not talk to each other effectively.
- There are many different factors that could affect the communication of the gut to the brain, including:
  - diet
  - genetics
  - infections
  - inflammations
  - bacteria
  - sensitive gut
  - abnormal movement of the gut (motility)

- harmful or adverse life events
- chronic stress
- family environment

## Pelvic Floor Problems

The pelvic floor is made up of muscles that attach to the pelvic bones. Pelvic floor issues can be divided into **underactive** and **overactive** pelvic floor. Overactive pelvic floor muscles are common in people with IBS.



**Caption:** Image is a colored graphic of the pelvis. This side cross-section shows the pelvic floor muscles supporting the bladder, uterus, and rectum. Notably, the pelvic floor holds all these organs in place. Problems in the pelvic floor can affect urination and bowel movements. Source: Wikimedia

## Overactive Pelvic Floor

### What is an overactive pelvic floor?

- In an overactive pelvic floor, the muscles are tense and tight, even at rest.
- This increased activity is associated with many pelvic pain conditions. Examples include: IBS, endometriosis, interstitial cystitis/bladder pain syndrome, and pelvic floor muscle pain, among others.

### How does the overactive pelvic floor lead to problems with having normal bowel movements?

- Normally, bowel movements occur in three phases. First, the stool fills the rectum. This triggers the urge to have a bowel movement. Second, when it is time for the bowel movement, the breathing muscles (diaphragm), stomach muscles (abdominal), and pelvic floor muscles work together to push the stool down. Third, the pelvic floor muscles and anal sphincter muscle relax and allow the stool to pass through.
- When the pelvic floor is overactive, bowel movements do not happen normally. It becomes hard to pass stool because the pelvic floor muscles have a hard time relaxing.

## Central Sensitization

### What is central sensitization?

- Central sensitization is a process where the nerves, spinal cord, and brain become more aware of signals that normally wouldn't register as painful. This happens in IBS. The feeling of needing to have a bowel movement is normally painless. In IBS, the sensation of bowel movement can become painful due to central sensitization.

### How are pelvic pain and IBS related?

- Medical research shows that IBS is common in women with chronic pelvic pain.
- IBS is also common in women who have endometriosis or interstitial cystitis/bladder pain syndrome.
- Research also shows that women with IBS report lower quality of life, pelvic floor problems, difficulty enjoying sexual activity due to discomfort or pain.
- Treating the pelvic floor may help IBS symptoms.
- Pelvic floor treatment may consist of physical therapy and lessons in how to relax.

## Treatment for IBS

What are two simple ways to help manage IBS symptoms?

- **1) “Craft” a better stool**
  - Eat slowly and chew your food. Research found that chewing more leads to better digestion.
  - Increase natural fiber intake from fruits, nuts and vegetables. Fiber helps to bulk the stool for easier bowel movements.
  - Drink water to help flush the system. A good goal is to see clear to light yellow urine when you go to the bathroom.
- **2) Calm the central nervous system**
  - There are many calming methods out there. Try them out to see what works for you. Some examples include: abdominal massage, exercise, sleep, mindfulness, guided imagery, and meditation.
  - Find joy! What makes you happy? Doing things that bring joy leads to positive changes in our body. It can increase oxytocin (the same hormone that is released when we snuggle a baby) and balances cortisol (our body's stress hormone). These changes may also help reduce IBS symptoms.

### Have questions?

Schedule an appointment to talk to your local pelvic pain specialist!

Find a provider near you on the IPPS website: [pelvicpain.org](http://pelvicpain.org).

## References

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