What is Irritable Bowel Syndrome?
Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a condition in the intestines that causes the movement of the digestive tract to not work as normal. IBS is quite common and causes discomfort and mild pain. When you eat or drink, your colon (small intestine, rectum and anus) connected to the intestines, absorbs the matter from your food. After a few days, the stool passes to the colon and is stored until a bowel movement occurs. IBS occurs when this process is out of order.

What are the causes of IBS?
At this time, doctors do not know what exactly causes IBS. Doctors do believe that signals from the brain that cause the bowel muscles to move are part of the problem. Other factors may trigger the condition, such as:

- foods and drink (such as beans and caffeine),
- stress,
- hormone changes,
- medicines,
- trapped gas, and
- family history.

Who is at risk for IBS?
IBS is more common among:

- women, (twice as likely as men),
- people in their late 20s,
- people with a family history of IBS,
- people who have a history of physical or sexual abuse, and
- people with other conditions, such as depression, migraine headaches, fibromyalgia, and psychological conditions,

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms of IBS are usually mild and may be better or worse from day to day. Over a long period, symptoms do not get worse. IBS does not cause serious conditions such as cancer or inflammatory bowel disease. Many other conditions may have similar symptoms to IBS. Some of the most common symptoms are:

- belly pain,
- constipation or diarrhea,
- bloating, and
- film-like substance on your stool.

Other symptoms that are less common include:

- headache,
- tiredness,
- backache, and
- urine related symptoms (such as, frequent need to urinate).

Remember that everyone’s bowel function is different. A normal range of bowel movements is as many as three stools a day to as few as three stools a week. A regular stool:

- is formed but not hard,
- is not painful, and
- does not have blood in it.
How do you test for IBS?

Your doctor will usually conduct a physical exam and ask about your symptoms. If needed, your doctor will perform additional tests and lab work. These may include:

- **Stool analysis**: a check for blood in the stool.
- **Sigmoidoscopy**: doctor will look at the inside of the lower part of your intestine.
- **Complete blood count**: check for blood cell count (red and white).
- **Colonoscopy**: by doing this, the doctor can rule out any other problems.

How do you treat IBS?

Treatment of IBS depends on the type of symptoms you have. The most common way to treat IBS is through making lifestyle changes, taking medicines, and trying to avoid certain foods that may trigger symptoms.

**Eating habits**

Create healthy eating habits to reduce your chances of IBS. Add more fiber to your meals. Fiber helps to move food down the digestion tract and can make bowel movement easier. Talk to your doctor before using an over-the-counter fiber supplement. Large meals, especially ones with lots of fat, may cause strong contractions in your colon and cause symptoms of IBS.

**Exercise**

Regular exercise can help reduce tension and make bowels more regular. We recommend getting at least 150 minutes of moderate-intense physical activity each week.

**Medicines**

Medicine may vary and be used with lifestyle changes. There is no standard medicine used to treat IBS. Talk to your doctor about whether medicine is right for you.

When should you call your doctor?

Call your health care team if you have any of the following symptoms:

- more tired than usual,
- unexplained weight loss,
- decreased appetite,
- blood in your stool, or
- pain from symptoms wake you up at night.

For more information

Visit kp.org/health
- Read about irritable bowel syndrome in the Health encyclopedia.

Visit kp.org/healthyliving/mas
- Find tools and resources to help you live well.

Call Kaiser Permanente Medical Advice

- Talk to your medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling (703) 359-7878 or 1-800-777-7904. TTY: (703) 359-7616 or 1-800-700-4901.