Dear Alice,

My father is 57 years old and he is experiencing pains which he has been told could be symptoms of a spastic colon. What can he do with his diet to alleviate these spasms, or what things can trigger these spasms?

? Helping son

Answer

Dear Helping son,

Spastic colon, otherwise known as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), is a common disorder seen by health care providers. The result is diarrhea, constipation, or alternating bouts of both. Other symptoms include abdominal pain or swelling, feelings of excessive fullness, gas, painful bowel movements, and mucus in the stool. Since these symptoms can occur with other disorders, diagnosis by a health care provider is advised.

Irritable bowel syndrome usually develops in late adolescence or early adulthood. It affects about twice as many women as men, which leads researchers to believe that hormonal changes, among other possible causes, may play a role in IBS. Factors such as stronger or weaker than normal muscle contractions in the gastrointestinal (GI) system and/or uncoordinated signals sent between the brain and the gut, may result in increased pain and discomfort. All this to say, the exact cause of IBS is not known. It does not, however, lead to cancer or require surgery. It?s not caused by any known physical abnormality, and is not the same as inflammatory bowel disease ? a much more serious condition. Nevertheless, it's a chronic disorder and is more difficult to cope with than the occasional bout of diarrhea or nervous stomach that most people experience from time to time.

You say that your father was told that these pains could be symptoms of a spastic colon, or IBS. It is not clear if he was given this information by a friend or by a health care provider. Interestingly, while 20 percent of people have IBS symptoms, only one in five of those folks actually see a health care provider. Consider encouraging your father to be one of the 20 percent who do seek medical attention. It?s best to get a diagnosis from a health care provider after s/he?s been able to take a health history, perform a physical exam, and complete certain diagnostic tests. Doing so will likely help your father identify the true cause of his discomfort and learn about the most effective treatment options.
Usually, dealing with IBS involves simple changes in a person's eating plan and lifestyle, under the guidance of a health care provider and/or registered dietitian. This handful of suggestions might offer some relief:

- **Increase fiber intake**. Fiber helps reduce spasms and promotes regular bowel movements. Unfortunately, it can also exacerbate diarrhea, gas, bloating, and cramping. To combat this, try gradually increasing the amount of fiber over a few weeks. This will help to allow the body to adjust to these symptoms. Some foods high in fiber are whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and beans.

- **Minimize or manage stress**. If stress triggers signs and symptoms of IBS, activities such as biofeedback, mindfulness training, deep breathing exercises, and/or counseling may offer relief and strengthen coping skills. Even simple relaxation activities like reading, taking a bath, or listening to music may also help.

- **Avoid trigger foods**. If you experience bloating and/or gas, you might want to avoid broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, beans, or any other foods that cause discomfort. Other foods that tend to trigger symptoms may include alcohol, coffee, soda, chocolate, fatty foods, dairy products, and some sugar-free sweeteners.

- **Eat regularly**. Eating at about the same time every day can promote regular bowel function. If diarrhea is a problem, eating small, frequent meals can help. For constipation, eat larger amounts of high-fiber foods to help move things along.

- **Make exercise routine**. In addition to reducing stress and feelings of depression, getting regular physical activity may also stimulate normal muscle contractions in your intestines. If you're new to working out, it's best to start slow and consult your health care provider about how to begin.

- **Drink plenty of water**. Water can help fight dehydration or make stools softer and easier to pass. Also, make sure to drink plenty of water when increasing fiber intake to reduce gas, bloating, and constipation.

- **Use medications if/as prescribed**. Antispasmodics may be prescribed to reduce cramping, tranquilizers for temporary relief of anxiety, anti-diarrheal medications for diarrhea, antidepressants for abdominal pain and depression, and bulk laxatives (high in fiber) or stool softeners to relieve constipation, if/when it's necessary. When taking anti-diarrheal medications and laxatives, use the lowest dose that works since these drugs can cause dependency and problems in the long-term.

- **Explore alternative options**. The use of acupuncture, peppermint, hypnosis, probiotics, yoga, and meditation show promise at managing symptoms and reducing pain.

Also, before your father's next medical appointment, you may want ask if it would be helpful for you to go with him to learn as much as you can about his condition. Sometimes people minimize their symptoms (or pain) and may not always accurately hear the treatment plan. This is where you can help by being a supportive listener and encouraging your father to follow the advice of the health care provider. While annoying at times, this is a medical condition that, with proper care, can be managed. For even more information on IBS, check out the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) website.

All the best to you and your father,

Alice!

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Published date:
Dec 23, 1994
Last reviewed on:
Sep 12, 2014

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