

(Irritable Colon Syndrome, Spastic Colon, Mucous Colitis)**DEFINITION**

1. **Irritable bowel syndrome** is a chronic relapsing complaint characterised by disturbed bowel habit and associated with abdominal discomfort and pain in the absence of organic disease of the bowel.
2. The synonym **irritable colon syndrome** is misleading because symptoms and dysfunction may not be confined to the colon, but rather irritable bowel syndrome is a disorder of the whole gastrointestinal tract.

CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS

3. The condition is very common and of world-wide distribution.
4. It is episodic, with varying combinations of abdominal pain and discomfort, distension, and alternating constipation and so called diarrhoea, by which patients usually mean the frequent passage of a small amount of stool in the form of scybala ("rabbit droppings").
5. Mucus is also often passed with the stool, and a sensation of incomplete emptying (rectal dissatisfaction) is complained of often.
6. Nausea, vomiting and heartburn also may be complained of.
7. Examination and investigation rule out organic disease of the bowel, with a variable excess of haustration on barium enema being the only, albeit inconstant, finding.

AETIOLOGY

8. **Irritable bowel syndrome** results from an episodic dysfunction of bowel neuromusculature, the latter being abnormally sensitive to stimulation. This involves the oesophagus and small bowel, and indeed the whole of the gastrointestinal tract, not just the colon.
9. This dysfunction may arise spontaneously for unknown reasons.
10. Psychological factors are clearly important in some patients. Thus, individuals may be tense, worrying and conscientious in their make up and may have a history of formal psychiatric disorder in the nature of anxiety, depression, or "cancer phobia". Such factors are thought to be at least aggravating and may be causative.
11. Food intolerance also plays a role in some patients, provocative foods being dairy produce, wheat, corn, fried foods, chocolate and citrus.
12. Cases of lactose intolerance due to lactase deficiency were previously diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome, but can now be split off because specific diagnosis can be made of this condition, and specific therapy offered.

13. Many patients report the onset of symptoms following infective gastroenteritis (food poisoning or dysentery). There is no evidence of persisting infection in these patients, and although the relationship is not proven, when symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome arise in close time relationship to infective gastroenteritis, then it is reasonable to assume the irritable bowel syndrome was precipitated in some way by the infection.

CONCLUSION

14. **Irritable bowel syndrome** is a dysfunction of the alimentary tract which may be due to various factors listed above or which may, in an individual case, not be shown to have an identifiable cause.

REFERENCES

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