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Eating with IBS

Start with meal timing

Eat regular meals, take your time and avoid long gaps without food. If large meals leave you bloated, try smaller portions with a snack between meals.

What's bothering you most?

Hard stools or straining	• Try oats or psyllium. Increase fibre slowly and follow packet fluid instructions. Avoid wheat bran, which can worsen gas, pain or bloating in a sensitive bowel. • Green kiwifruit can help constipation. Try two daily, building up from one if needed. Prunes can also help. Oranges, berries and other whole fruit add fibre too, although the direct constipation evidence is less strong. • Try linseeds (flaxseeds), building up to one tablespoon daily in cereal or yoghurt. Drink at least 150 mL water with each tablespoon.
Loose stools or urgency	• Reduce caffeine. Try a smaller coffee or decaf. Limit alcohol. • Avoid sugar-free gum, mints and drinks. These may contain sorbitol, mannitol or xylitol, which can loosen stools.
Wind or bloating	• Avoid fizzy drinks. Try water instead. Eat slowly and try smaller meals if large portions leave you bloated. • Try smaller portions of beans or lentils, or rinsed tinned varieties. Reduce added inulin or chicory-root fibre if these increase wind.

Common triggers worth checking

Smaller amounts of trigger foods are often tolerated. Try reducing the portion first.

Milk
Try lactose-free milk if ordinary milk causes wind or loose stools. Keep cheese or yoghurt you tolerate.

Wheat
Wheat sensitivity can occur without coeliac disease, sometimes due to fructans. Try rice noodles instead of wheat noodles or pasta. Complete coeliac testing on gluten first.

Onion and garlic
Try chives or green spring onion tops for flavour if onion or garlic causes bloating.

Fatty or spicy foods
Reduce fatty meals, including fried foods and creamy sauces, if they trigger symptoms. Try grilled or baked food. Use less chilli if spicy food causes symptoms.

What about a low-FODMAP diet?

FODMAPs are carbohydrates that can draw water into the bowel and produce gas, causing pain, bloating or diarrhoea.

Before a full diet, try reducing one common source you eat often, such as onion, garlic, large wheat servings or legumes. Limit milk only if lactose causes symptoms.

Trials support a low-FODMAP diet for IBS, though it doesn't help everyone. A dietitian can guide a 2 to 6 week trial, protect your fibre and nutrient intake, and help you bring foods back.

See your GP about blood in your stool, unintended weight loss or diarrhoea that wakes you at night. Heavy bleeding, black tarry stools, severe pain or fainting need urgent care.

Sources: NICE · British Dietetic Association · Kiwifruit trial · Monash FODMAP · Prunes trial · Monash app · Full IBS guide