

The digestion process is complex and involves many steps. If something goes wrong along the way, it can manifest as one of several problems. Since you're reading this book, chances are you have a good idea of some of the following problems and how they can affect your quality of life: Passing enough gas to be accused of contributing to global warming. Spending more time cuddling your hot water bottle than your significant other. Getting your exercise by running to the bathroom multiple times a day. Wearing stretchy or loose clothing to accommodate your bloated belly. Or saving on toilet paper by having a #2 just once a week. Does any of this sound familiar?

Living with digestive problems like bloating, gas, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and constipation day after day is no fun. Many people suffering with these issues come to a point where they fear socializing and even avoid eating out or traveling. Some people force themselves to fast the day before appointments or public events to try to avoid embarrassing situations. Have your bowels taken control of your life?

In addition to these obvious and unpleasant symptoms, digestive problems can also have repercussions on your overall health. If your intestines now seem to be ruling your life, you may also be depressed, lack energy, and feel unable to live life to the fullest. You may develop nutrient deficiencies, have troubles with your weight, and experience aches and pains you didn't use to have. To make matters worse, your friends and family may argue that you're just imagining it, that you "have a sensitive stomach," or that you complain too much. Many people simply don't understand how miserable digestive problems can make you feel. I've been on both sides of the fence (see my story in the introductory chapter). I once thought IBS couldn't be more than just "unpleasant" until I experienced it myself. Now I know it can be pure torture.

Digestive problems are one of the top reasons for consulting a doctor, but most health practitioners don't really know what to do about these issues. This is a shame, since an estimated 25 to 35 million people in the United States alone (10 to 15 percent of the population) suffer from IBS, the most commonly diagnosed gastrointestinal disorder. Digestive disorders affect both men and women of all ages, including children. Worldwide, this figure ranges between nine and 23 percent of the population, which means that it affects at least one in 10 (and even up to one in four) of the people around you. Many of them have probably decided to keep these problems to themselves considering the unfortunate lack of understanding from both the general public and the medical community.

Although symptoms like bloating, abdominal pain, or abnormal bowel movements are real problems, they're not very specific. Extensive testing is therefore required in order to find the underlying cause of these digestive issues. Is it a GI infection? Celiac disease? Crohn's disease? And if your doctor doesn't find anything, the resulting diagnosis is usually irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME (IBS)

IBS is by far the most commonly diagnosed digestive disorder, but it's highly misunderstood. IBS symptoms can include bloating, gas, abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation, and alternating constipation and diarrhea. Although IBS is a common diagnosis, it is not normal. If you've been dealing with IBS symptoms for more than a few weeks or months, it's important to consult your doctor for more testing. IBS may not be life threatening, but it can affect your health and quality of life.

Before you can be diagnosed with IBS, your doctor first needs to ensure you don't suffer from another serious condition such as celiac disease, an inflammatory bowel disease such as Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, or colon cancer. If your intestines appear healthy but aren't functioning as well as they should, your doctor will compare your symptoms with a set of criteria called the Rome III criteria. The Rome III criteria were developed by a group of gastroenterologists to diagnose digestive disorders, such as IBS, that do not present with physical abnormalities. You may be diagnosed with IBS if: