

IBD and IBS: A Tale of Two Disorders

April is IBS awareness month. I see and hear it all the time. Sometimes from medical professionals and sometimes written in articles. They confuse IBD with IBS or mix the two together. While these are both disorders affecting the digestive system and have some common symptoms, they are really very different.

IBD: Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Inflammatory bowel disease is the name of a group of diseases, ulcerative colitis (u.c.) and Crohn's disease, that cause chronic inflammation in the digestive tract. There are 1.4 million people affected by IBD in the US. It can occur in both sexes at almost any age but is most commonly diagnosed in teenagers and young adults. IBD is an autoimmune disease where the immune system attacks the gut, like friendly fire. Symptoms include diarrhea, bloody stools, abdominal pain, weight loss and fatigue. Complications can occur such as malnutrition, anemia, osteoporosis, ulcers and bowel blockage and often require hospitalization. Medical treatment is aimed at reducing inflammation and controlling the immune system. Surgery may be needed if treatment fails. There is an increased risk of colorectal cancer with a long history of IBD.

IBS: Irritable Bowel Syndrome

IBS is a syndrome, a group of symptoms causing digestive distress. Unlike IBD, it's a functional disorder, not a disease. It affects the function of the digestive tract but doesn't cause inflammation or damage. Up to 20% of the population has IBS. This condition is more common in women and is usually diagnosed in people under 45. The main symptoms are mild to severe abdominal pain and cramping, bloating, gas and/or an alteration in bowel habits. Unlike IBD, there is rarely weight loss or malnutrition. It's not caused by stress, though stress can make symptoms worse. Medical treatment is aimed at managing pain, spasms and bowel habit changes. Other health problems, like ovarian cancer, can be misdiagnosed and labeled IBS.

Can you have both?

Yes, you can. Having IBS doesn't increase your chance of IBD but up to 20% of IBD patients also have IBS which is the same as the general population. While not related, having both conditions can intensify symptoms of each.

Resources:

- Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America (CCFA) <http://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/>
- IBD vs IBS <http://www.badgut.org/information-centre/a-z-digestive-topics/the-irritable-gut-ibs-vs-ibd/>
- Inflammatory Bowel Disease and Irritable Bowel Syndrome: Similarities and Differences <http://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/assets/pdfs/ibd-and-irritable-bowel.pdf>
- International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) <https://www.iffgd.org/>

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