

You're not alone - A doctor's take on common gastrointestinal symptoms

Written by

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(StatePoint) Frequent and bothersome gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms are more common than you may think. While estimates may vary, five percent to 15 percent of adults in the United States may be affected by chronic GI conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome with constipation (IBS-C) or chronic idiopathic constipation (CIC).

This could mean as many as 13 million adults may suffer from IBS-C, and as many as 35 million adults may suffer from CIC.

According to a survey, the majority of adults with these conditions may experience disruptive symptoms three to five days per month. Recurring abdominal pain and constipation, including hard stools, and infrequent and incomplete bowel movements, may indicate IBS with constipation or, if you have these symptoms with little to no abdominal pain, chronic idiopathic constipation (CIC). Adults report that these symptoms impact their daily activities.

Research also shows that only 40 to 50 percent of these sufferers plan to talk to their physician about their GI symptoms within the next year. Experts say that part of the problem is patients are uncomfortable discussing the specific symptoms of IBS-C or CIC.

"Patients often get embarrassed talking about their bathroom habits with a physician," says Dr. Steven Lamm, internist and author of "No Guts, No Glory." "There is no need to feel self-conscious."

You are not alone. Dr. Lamm recommends preparing for your appointment ahead of time to ensure a more effective conversation. Be ready to discuss the following with your doctor:

- Do you feel abdominal pain?
- How often do you experience hard stools associated with constipation?
- Do you have fewer than three bowel movements a week?
- Are your bowel movements satisfactory; with a sense of complete evacuation?

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- How long have you experienced these symptoms (a week, a month, more)?
- How frequently do you experience these symptoms?
- What have you tried to relieve symptoms (drinking more water, taking fiber or laxatives, increasing exercise)?
- Do your symptoms keep coming back?
- Has your life been disrupted due to your symptoms?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for these conditions, but there are ways to help manage symptoms, including dietary and lifestyle changes and taking laxatives. Also, keeping a symptom diary may help identify triggers that exacerbate symptoms.

Keep in mind, over-the-counter laxatives and stool softeners may help with occasional constipation, but they are not approved for long-term use without physician supervision and are not approved for IBS-C. If you are a candidate, a physician may prescribe FDA-approved medications for these conditions.

With open and clear communication between patient and doctor, managing bothersome symptoms may be possible.