



South Wales Neuroendocrine Tumour Service

Small Intestinal Bacterial Overgrowth (SIBO)

What is SIBO?

In healthy people, the small bowel is usually a fairly sterile area and few bacteria are able to survive here. Nearly all bacteria living in the gastrointestinal tract live in the colon (large bowel). The bacteria in the colon are very important, they help with the digestion of food.

However, in some people, surgery or certain medications interfere with the normal control process of the bowel and the patterns of muscular contractions in the small bowel can be changed. This is often permanent. Bacteria can then multiply and live within some or all of the small bowel. This is called 'small bowel bacterial overgrowth'. When the bacteria in the small bowel reach high enough numbers they start to cause symptoms.

What are the symptoms of small bowel bacterial overgrowth?

Small bowel bacterial overgrowth can cause a number of different and vague symptoms. The most common symptom is diarrhoea. Other symptoms may include:

- Pale stools
- Greasy stools
- Excess wind
- Bloating
- Vomiting
- Pain
- Constipation

What causes small bowel bacterial overgrowth?

- Abdominal or pelvic surgery, after a part of the bowel has been removed
- Radiotherapy for cancer in the abdomen or pelvis which can disrupt bowel contraction patterns
- A weakened immune system, such as during and after chemotherapy

- Diabetes and other diseases such as scleroderma, jejunal diverticulosis, chronic pancreatitis and Crohn's disease
- It probably happens in 10% of the population when sometimes it is misdiagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

How is small bowel bacterial overgrowth diagnosed?

- A breath test which involves drinking a sugar solution and measuring the levels of hydrogen and methane gases in the breath over a period of time.
- Some people who have bacterial overgrowth have mildly abnormal blood tests that indicate a low grade infection which suggests it might be present.
- Gastroscopy (Endoscopy) to look at the small bowel and remove fluid from the gut. If the fluid grows bacteria in the lab it is helpful in determining what antibiotics will be most effective.

None of these tests are completely accurate. Sometimes the doctor will prefer to give a trial of an antibiotic to see if a person's symptoms improve, rather than waiting to do tests to look for bacterial overgrowth. Finding the right antibiotic may involve trial and error and may require more antibiotics in the future.

How is small bowel bacterial overgrowth treated?

- Antibiotics: sometimes more than one course is needed
- Probiotics: these are not currently available on prescription as few have undergone testing in clinical trials but over-the-counter probiotics may help to increase the number of 'good' bacteria
- Treatment to make the bowel contract more effectively: if the bowel can be made to move more efficiently, this may prevent bacteria from growing in large enough numbers to cause problems. For example, one of the side effects of an antidepressant drug called Paroxetine is that it also speeds up the contractions of the small bowel. This may be useful in low doses with bacterial overgrowth.

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