

LIVING WITH IBS

Breaking the silence

"It was all in my head."

Cybill Shepherd remembers her first doctor telling her when she tried to explain her IBS symptoms. "The pain and the bloating were somehow emotional. It didn't exist."

Best known for her television roles as Maddie Hayes, opposite Bruce Willis in *Moonlighting*, or as Cybill Sheridan in *Cybill*, America was unaware that Shepherd was suffering in silence from Irritable Bowel Syndrome, which affects one in five adult Americans—mostly women in their twenties—is one of the most common gastrointestinal disorders.

"The symptoms continued," says Shepherd. "I was bloated; I actually look like I was pregnant, but I didn't know what to do about. The best I could do was to hide it. I couldn't miss filming episodes of *Moonlighting*. If I did take time out, I would use the excuse that I was exhausted or ate something bad, but I couldn't describe what was going on."

Constantly searching for some sort of relief, she tried everything, from fiber supplements and over-the-counter laxatives, but none of these helped relieve all of her symptoms.

Nothing helped, until Shepherd decided to change doctors. "I was open with my new doctor and explained my symptoms to her. She diagnosed me with IBS and was able to prescribe medication that helped relieve the symptoms."

IBS is a dysmotility disorder characterized by abdominal pain or discomfort, bloating and altered bowel function, such as constipation or diarrhea, or both. Ninety-six percent of undiagnosed patients are unaware that their symptoms may actually be IBS with constipation. They don't seek medical treatment because they are either embarrassed to talk about their symptoms, don't think anything could be done about their symptoms, or don't think it is a real medical condition.

"Working with the Amazing Women campaign, National Women's Health Resource Center (NWHRC) and Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation, my goal is to encourage women to open up to their doctors about their symptoms and stop suffering," says Shepherd.

"Silence has never protected us."

Connie Smith * of Atlanta, never thought constipation, even when it got bad. To her there was no reason to go to the doctor. The same symptoms ran in her family, and to her this was just part of life.

"Sometimes you just don't want to know," says Smith. "There's cancer in my family history, and I was afraid that is what I was going to hear."

The turning point for Connie was at a family wedding.

"At the airport, returning home, I was so bloated from constipation that people thought I was pregnant. It was embarrassing," she recalls. "It was also a wake up call to me that I needed to go to a doctor."

While the cause is not known, stress can play a big part, and in some cases it's hereditary. There is no known cure, but IBS can be managed with a combination of lifestyle changes and/or medicine.

"IBS is usually discovered when talking about other medical concerns, and patients will then mention symptoms related to IBS," says Dr. Steven D. Lenhard, president of Adult Medicine of Marietta, P.C. "It can be difficult to diagnose because there is no test, sometimes the symptoms are not that concrete, and some patients

find it hard to talk to their doctors."

He adds that treatment depends on the symptoms. "For those experiencing more severe symptoms, medicine might be their only option. For others, we start with simple lifestyle changes, such as adding more water and fiber in their diet, and then medication."

With proper medication, Smith has been able to manage her IBS, and finally, as she feels, live her life. "If I can offer any advice to women who might be suffering from IBS, it's to talk to your doctor. If you feel like you can't talk to your doctor about the symptoms, then it might be time to change doctors."



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