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DigestiveHealthCenter.com

DIGESTIVE HEALTH CENTER

Understanding and Treating SIBO/IMO: Patient Guide

What your test result means

Your breath test was positive for one of the following:

- **SIBO (Small Intestinal Bacterial Overgrowth):** too many bacteria are growing in the small intestine, where there should normally be relatively few. These bacteria ferment food and produce gas (mostly hydrogen), causing bloating, gas, abdominal pain, diarrhea and sometimes trouble absorbing nutrients.
- **IMO (Intestinal Methanogen Overgrowth):** an overgrowth of methane-producing organisms (archaea, not true bacteria). Methane slows down the gut, so IMO tends to cause bloating and constipation. Because these organisms are hardier, IMO is usually treated with a combination of two medications.

Treatment usually combines a short course of antibiotics, some diet changes, and steps to address the underlying cause. This is a relapsing condition, so symptoms can return and sometimes need retreatment.

Diet: the basics

The main goal is to reduce "fermentable" foods that feed the overgrown organisms. A low-FODMAP diet (low in certain fermentable sugars and fibers) is the most commonly used approach. This is typically a short-term diet (about 4–6 weeks), not a permanent one, and works best with guidance from a dietitian.

Foods to limit or avoid:

- **Sugar alcohols and artificial sweeteners: sorbitol, mannitol, xylitol and sucralose (check labels on "sugar-free" gum, candy and drinks).**
- **Added fibers/prebiotics: inulin, chicory root and fiber supplements.**
- **High-FODMAP foods: onions, garlic, wheat-based breads/pasta, beans and lentils, apples, pears, watermelon and high-lactose dairy (milk, soft cheeses and ice cream).**
- **Alcohol and large, fatty meals.**

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Foods generally better tolerated:

- **Lean proteins (chicken, fish and eggs), rice, oats, potatoes and firm tofu.**
- **Low-FODMAP vegetables (carrots, zucchini, spinach and bell peppers).**
- **Low-FODMAP fruits in modest amounts (berries, grapes, oranges and bananas).**

Eat regular meals, avoid oversized portions and leave a few hours between meals when possible to let the gut's natural "cleaning wave" work.

Foods with active cultures and probiotics

Probiotics have mixed evidence in SIBO/IMO — they help some people and can worsen bloating in others. Discuss with your clinician before adding them, especially during antibiotic treatment. If recommended, food sources of live cultures include:

- **Plain yogurt with "live and active cultures" (choose low-lactose or lactose-free if dairy bothers you).**
- **Kefir (a fermented milk drink; lactose-free versions available).**
- **Fermented vegetables such as sauerkraut and kimchi (small amounts).**
- **Miso and tempeh (fermented soy).**
- **Certain aged cheeses (naturally low in lactose).**

Standard antibiotic regimens and common side effects

Your clinician will choose the regimen based on whether your test showed hydrogen (SIBO) or methane (IMO) and your other health conditions.

For hydrogen-predominant SIBO

- **Rifaximin — a gut-specific antibiotic that is barely absorbed into the body, so it is generally well tolerated. Common/possible side effects: nausea, headache and mild abdominal discomfort. Cost and insurance coverage can be a barrier.**

For methane-positive IMO (usually combination therapy):

- **Rifaximin + Neomycin — the combination most often used for methane overgrowth.**
  - **Neomycin side effects include nausea and diarrhea. Rarely, longer-term use may affect hearing or kidney function.**

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Other antibiotics sometimes used (alone or in combination):

- **Metronidazole — side effects: metallic taste, nausea and headache. Do not drink any alcohol during treatment and for about 3 days after, as the combination can cause flushing, vomiting and rapid heartbeat. May cause tingling/numbness with prolonged use.**
- **Ciprofloxacin — side effects: nausea, diarrhea; less commonly tendon pain or rupture, and nerve-related symptoms. Can interact with other medications and affect heart rhythm.**
- **Amoxicillin-clavulanate — side effects: diarrhea, nausea; not for those with penicillin allergy.**
- **Doxycycline or tetracycline — side effects: sun sensitivity, stomach upset; take with water and stay upright; avoid in pregnancy.**
- **Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole — side effects: rash, nausea and sun sensitivity; not for those with sulfa allergy.**

Any antibiotic can occasionally cause a more serious intestinal infection (C. difficile). Call your clinician if you develop severe or watery/bloody diarrhea, fever or significant abdominal pain during or after treatment.

When to call your clinician

- **Severe or bloody diarrhea, fever or worsening abdominal pain**
- **Vomiting or inability to keep food/fluids down**
- **A new rash, swelling, trouble breathing or signs of an allergic reaction**
- **Hearing changes or ringing in the ears (if taking neomycin)**
- **Unintended weight loss or symptoms that do not improve after treatment**

After treatment

Because symptoms can come back, your clinician may discuss diet maintenance, treating any underlying cause (such as motility problems or medication use) and sometimes repeat testing or retreatment.

This handout is for general education and does not replace your clinician's specific instructions. Always follow the dose, timing and duration they prescribe.

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