Simple Remedies Work to Relieve IBS

WHEN IT COMES TO treating irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), simple, old-fashioned remedies such as peppermint oil can work as well as pricey prescription drugs. That’s the conclusion of a new review of research on treatments for IBS that found soluble fiber, ispaghula husk, over-the-counter anti-spasmodics such as hyoscine, and peppermint oil are all effective. The analysis looked at 12 controlled studies of fiber, 22 trials of anti-spasmodic agents and four trials of peppermint oil, involving a total of more than 2,700 patients.

The findings echo a recent review by a committee of the American College of Gastroenterology. Most of these remedies are readily available without a prescription, the authors of the new review commented, “but, with the advent of newer, more expensive drugs, are often overlooked as potentially effective treatments.”

IBS, also known as functional bowel disease and spastic colon, is a disorder characterized by cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, constipation and diarrhea. Although IBS affects up to 20% of all adults, no link has been established between IBS and inflammatory bowel diseases such as Crohn’s disease or ulcerative colitis.

TO LEARN MORE.

States Ground Airborne Claims

LOOKING for a cure for your winter cold? You might want to think twice about Airborne, the popular supplement that advertises it was invented by a teacher. Thirty-two states recently taught the makers of Airborne a lesson about deceptive advertising: The company agreed to settle the charges for a $7 million fine, promising not to market Airborne as a cold or flu preventative or cure. The 32 state Attorneys General charged that Airborne—a mix of vitamin C and herbs sold as a dietary supplement—crossed the line that requires products making health claims to get FDA approval.

This is the third multi-million-dollar settlement for Airborne. The company previously settled a $23.5 million class-action lawsuit and reached a related $6.5 million settlement with the FTC.

Naps Beat Caffeine as a Pick-Me-Up

SCIENCE HAS PROVIDED the perfect excuse to take an afternoon nap: Napping really does work better than caffeine to boost your physical and mental performance. University of California-San Diego researchers put 61 people through a series of mechanical, perceptual and verbal tasks, then divided the subjects into three groups: One group took a two-hour nap, another popped a 200-milligram caffeine pill and a third got a placebo. When re-tested later in the day, nappers did significantly better on both the perceptual and verbal tasks, and both nappers and the placebo group beat caffeine-takers in motor skills. The caffeine group did consistently report feeling less sleepy than the others, even those who took naps—but their performance failed to match their claims of alertness.

“People think they’re smarter on caffeine,” said lead author Sarah C. Mednick, PhD. “But this study is a strong argument for taking a nap instead of having a cup of coffee.”

TO LEARN MORE.

38% Using Unconventional Treatments

ALMOST four in 10 American adults—and one in nine children—are using complementary and alternative medical (CAM) treatments, up slightly from five years ago, according to a new government study. Back pain was the top reason for turning to CAM treatments, followed by neck and joint pain and arthritis; popular treatments included deep-breathing exercises, meditation and massage therapy.

Overall, the most commonly used adult treatment was fish oil.

The study was the first to ask about use of unconventional treatments by those under 18, who most commonly sought relief for back pain, colds, anxiety, stress and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The most common product used by children was Echinacea, often touted as a cold remedy.

The survey involved some 23,000 adults and 9,500 children nationwide. Similar to 2002 results, the survey found complementary and alternative medicine use higher among women than men, with older and better-educated adults also more likely to use CAM.

“These statistics confirm that CAM practices are a frequently used component of Americans’ health care regimens, and reinforce the need for rigorous research to study the safety and effectiveness of these therapies,” said Josephine P. Briggs, MD, director of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, which developed the survey. “The data also point out the need for patients and health care providers to openly discuss CAM use to ensure safe and coordinated care.” (See our Q&A with Dr. Briggs, September 2008 Healthletter.)

Building a Better Carrot

WHat’s up, doc? Carrots with extra calcium, that’s what. USDA researchers have found a way to tweak a gene in carrots that affects the transport of calcium across cell membranes. They tested the modified carrots on 30 volunteers, split into two groups; after two weeks, the group fed the enhanced carrots had absorbed 41% more calcium than those munching the regular veggies. Although calcium is a key component for healthy bones, many people don’t get the recommended 1,000 milligrams daily for adults ages 19 to 50, 1,200 milligrams for those over 50.

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