Irritable bowel—irritable person

Serenity Aberdour, ND

What is it?
Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a "functional" bowel disorder. Unlike inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis), which may have similar symptoms, when IBS patients are, probed, scoped, and X-rayed, nothing appears abnormal about the structure of the digestive tract. Yet symptoms—gas, bloating, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, anxiety and/or depression—all indicate things are not functioning as they should.

Although there is disagreement among experts on the specific cause of IBS, and no one treatment seems to work for everybody, some factors have been identified that may contribute to the onset and aggravation of the condition. Several natural treatments have also been found to help.

Contributing factors
1. Infection:
One in five patients with IBS is able to trace the onset of the illness to a gastrointestinal infection. Think about that trip to Mexico or the weekend camping adventure that was followed by days of diarrhea. Infection, as well as the many antibiotics used to treat them, may help to set up an environment for gastrointestinal (GI) dysfunction.
2. Food intolerances:
The intestinal tract of IBS patients is particularly sensitive to irritation and food intolerances are not uncommon. Limiting foods known to irritate the sensitive lining of the intestine may be beneficial.

3. High-fat diet:
Fat encourages contractions of the colon. In the case of IBS, the colon may already be prone to spasms, which can contribute further to symptoms such as abdominal pain and diarrhea.

4. Sugar:
Poor absorption of sugars such as fructose (from fruit), sorbitol (found in many “diet” foods), and lactose (from dairy products) has also been linked to IBS. When the intestine does not absorb sugar properly, then gas, bloating, abdominal pain, and diarrhea can result.

5. Psychological factors:
Stress has a big impact on the digestive tract and can wreak havoc on digestive function. Do you recall the pre-exam jitters that led to extended bathroom breaks? A high-stress time at the office that left you constipated? As well, a history of traumatic experiences, particularly childhood physical and/or sexual abuse, is found to be more prevalent among IBS patients. This is not to say that IBS is all in your mind, but the emotions and the digestive tract are clearly linked. Finding ways to calm the mind may help to calm the GI.

6. Low-fibre intake:
Ongoing constipation is a problem in some IBS cases.
Natural treatments

1. Strip away stress.
Several studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of psychotherapy or stress counselling on IBS symptoms.

Exercise is also a great stress buster. Take time out for a quick run, a long walk, some yoga, or an exercise class at the local gym. The benefits will extend far beyond your IBS.

2. Praiseworthy probiotics.
A large, necessary community of bacteria live happily in your intestine and help to keep it healthy. When antibiotics used to treat infections upset the delicate balance of this community, symptoms such as abdominal discomfort, gas, bloating, and diarrhea can result. Probiotics help re-establish friendly bacteria and reduce these symptoms of imbalance.
3. Improve nutrition.
Reducing the intake of common GI irritants such as dairy products, caffeine, chocolate, alcohol, iron supplements, magnesium-containing antacids, and aspirin may help. Keep in mind that even a food, which is generally considered nutritious, can cause problems if an allergy or intolerance to it exists. Keep a diet diary for a week or so, carefully noting food intake and its impact on symptoms.

Avoiding excess fat intake can also help. Try reducing the number of fatty foods in your diet. If you already eat a fairly low-fat diet, try spreading the fat you eat throughout the day and avoid eating it all at one meal.

A diet that is low in sugar has been found to help some cases of IBS. Your doctor can perform a simple breath test to determine if you have a problem digesting certain sugars. Try eliminating sugar from your diet for a period of at least one week to see if it reduces IBS symptoms.

4. Fill up on fibre.
Psyllium husk has been found to be a helpful fibre supplement for many IBS patients. It provides necessary bulk, without the allergenic potential that some other products such as wheat bran may have. Take psyllium with plenty of water as it expands once it comes into contact with moisture and may cause intestinal blockages if not enough water is present to flush it through.
holistic healing

5. Pep up your system with peppermint oil. Peppermint oil reduces spasms of the intestine, including abdominal pain, bloating, gas, and increased stool frequency. Look for enteric-coated capsules. This means that the oil is encapsulated in such a way that it will not be completely digested in the stomach but will travel to the intestine where it can really help. A few words of caution about this treatment, though—if your IBS symptoms include a lot of “upper GI” symptoms (heartburn, chest pain, problems swallowing) or if you have a history of gastroesophageal-reflux disease, peppermint may not be for you. Some IBS patients have also been found to have sensitivity to salicylates, a natural substance that is found in several foods, including peppermint. Consult your naturopath before beginning this or any other treatment.

Other treatments may also be helpful in treating IBS. To help decide which approach is most suitable for you, seek the advice of a naturopath in your area. Once you are on the right track, managing your IBS may be easier than you thought.

Serenity Aberdour, ND, practises in Toronto. She can be reached at docere@care2.com.

We welcome your feedback at editorial@alive.com. For more information, visit alive.com