

## **IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME (IBS): A Naturopathic Approach**

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is characterized by inflammation and irritation of the large intestine resulting in abdominal bloating, pain, and alternating constipation and diarrhea. IBS is the most common gastrointestinal disorder in North America and accounts for 30-50% of referrals to gastroenterologists. Approximately 15% of North Americans have IBS complaints with women reporting IBS symptoms twice as often as men. There is no evidence of structural abnormalities in the gut in patients with IBS. The following symptoms can mimic IBS and should be ruled out by an MD: colon cancer, diverticular disease, inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's or colitis), intestinal candidiasis (yeast overgrowth), lactose intolerance, celiac disease, pancreatic insufficiency, fecal impaction, and metabolic disorders, such as adrenal insufficiency, diabetes, or hyperthyroidism.

The signs and symptoms of IBS include:

- Cramp-like pain in the middle or to one side of the lower abdomen
- Pain usually relieved with bowel movements
- Loose or more frequent painful bowel movements
- Diarrhea or constipation, usually alternating
- Symptoms of upset stomach: flatulence, nausea, loss of appetite
- Headache, backache
- Rectal pain
- Fatigue
- Varying degrees of anxiety and depression
- Excessive secretion of colonic mucus

The possible causes of IBS include:

**1. Refined Sugars:** This may be the most important contributing factor to IBS. A diet high in refined sugars quickly raises blood sugar levels, causing a sharp decrease in intestinal peristalsis—the rhythmic contractions of the intestines that propel food through the digestive tract. Since sugar is primarily absorbed in the first sections of the small intestine, this area is ordered to stop contracting and eventually becomes *atonic*, or paralyzed. When partially digested food sits in the small intestine, bacteria have an abnormally long time to feed. The result is bacterial overgrowth.

**2. Food Sensitivities:** Approximately two-thirds of patients with IBS have at least one food sensitivity. The most common ones are wheat and dairy. Naturopathic doctors can assess food sensitivities through elimination diets, and/or blood tests.

**3. Disturbed bacterial microflora as a result of antibiotic or antacid use:** Antibiotics wipe out the friendly as well as unfriendly bacteria in the gut, disrupting normal gut ecology. Antacids decrease hydrochloric acid secretion in the stomach. Hydrochloric acid is necessary for proper digestion and to destroy unfriendly bacteria in the stomach.

**4. Laxative Abuse:** Laxatives are irritants that work by triggering forceful contractions of the intestines. Laxative abuse can damage the intestinal lining and also results in nutrient malabsorption.

**5. Stress, emotional conflict, anxiety and depression:** Stress disrupts the secretion of the body's digestive factors: hydrochloric acid and pancreatic enzymes. IBS flare-ups are often preceded by significant stress: obsessive worry about everyday problems, marital tension, fear of loss of a beloved person, death of a loved one, etc. It is impossible to digest food when you are stressed out or on the run while you eat. This is because intestinal peristalsis (movement of the bowels during digestion) can only occur when the body is relaxed.

**6. Disease-promoting diet:** The SAD (Standard American Diet) is based on animal products and processed foods, and is typically low in vegetables, legumes, fruits, nuts and seeds, and whole grains. This type of diet does not promote gut health. It is low in fiber, antioxidants, essential fatty acids, vitamins and minerals, and high in damaging factors such as saturated fat, trans fats, sugars, refined carbohydrates, MSG, food preservatives. Furthermore, excessive consumption of tea, coffee, and carbonated beverages interfere with digestion.

**7. Excess Alcohol consumption:** Alcohol is an irritant that increases gut permeability (leaky gut) to toxins and potentially allergenic foods. Alcohol increases the adrenal glands' secretion of stress hormones, including cortisol, which disrupt digestive secretions.

**8. Smoking:** Nicotine stimulates adrenal glands to secrete stress hormones.

Some tips to preventing IBS flare-ups:

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, carbonated beverages, and simple sugars
- Get adequate sleep (8 hours a night). Poor sleep quality correlates with an increase in frequency and severity of IBS symptoms.
- Don't smoke
- Learn to deal with stress constructively (meditate, pray, exercise, yoga)
- Choose a health-promoting diet rich in whole, unprocessed, preferably organic foods, especially plant foods and cold-water fish.

Conventional medical treatment involves tricyclic antidepressants (amitriptyline), antidepressant SSRI drugs (fluoxetine), antispasmodic agents (dicyclonine or hyoscyamine), laxatives for constipation, and loperamide for diarrhea. These methods treat symptoms but do not address the cause of the IBS.

Naturopathic treatment examines and treats the whole person by taking into consideration their diet, energy, stress levels, and lifestyle. A treatment plan is unique and individualized for each patient and involves dietary modifications, supplements (probiotics, digestive enzymes), and homeopathic remedies specific for each individual. Acupuncture and/or Bowen Therapy can be quite useful for balancing the nervous system, reducing stress hormone secretion, and improving bowel regularity and function.