**STRESS AND IBS**

Stress is becoming more prevalent in the lives of many people. In fact, according to the American Institute of Stress, it is estimated that it may be the cause of 40% of disease. Stress-related ailments are the reason for 3 out of 4 doctor visits, and it’s no secret that the amount of stress that one has in life has a tremendous impact on health, specifically on digestion and the gut microbiome. People with IBS may be more sensitive to stress and its effects on the body.  Unfortunately, the pressure is an unavoidable part of everyone’s life, and it is not necessary for those who have IBS to struggle alone.

**Diagnosing IBS**

By the time patients are appropriately diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), 25% have visited a health professional at least five times before reaching a diagnosis. It seems that many times, IBS symptoms are not always recognized. Or, the determination of IBS is not being communicated to the patient.

This is significant because IBS has an impact on one’s ability to function generally as a member of society. Loss of work, rescheduling, and commuting can all be affected by symptoms associated with this digestive ailment. The condition is twice as likely to occur in women, and many times the bowl fluctuations and patterns vary according to a woman’s menstrual cycle, suggesting that hormones play a role. We also know that often, IBS strikes in the teen and college years and may seem to settle later in life.

**IBS Symptoms**

IBS is a disorder of the large intestine (colon). Some of the more common problems associated with IBS are diarrhea, constipation, cramping, abdominal pain, bloating and gas. IBS is a chronic condition that will need to be treated and managed long term. It is important to note that IBS doesn’t change the structure or integrity of the colonic tissue, nor does it increase the risk of colon or rectal cancer.

Currently, there is no cure for IBS, but there are many effective ways to manage the disease. A rather small number of people will experience severe symptoms that require medication and counseling. For the more significant majority of sufferers; their symptoms can be managed by adjusting their lifestyle, diet, and incorporating exercise.

The first step if you’re looking to improve irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or another digestive disorder, is to understand more about the Low FODMAP diet and if it can help.

**The Effects of Stress**

Stress and emotions have a tremendous impact on those with digestive and gastrointestinal issues. Whereas particular stress or emotional trigger may result in symptoms for one person, another may be completely unaffected. It is a very individualized problem that is unique to each person.

When we’re under stress, our nervous and endocrine systems operate on high alert which changes a variety of body processes, including blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and bowel functioning. One of the results of chronic stress is that it raises the levels of the hormone cortisol in the blood. An important point to remember is that even if the pressure is only perceived and is not a reality, it still raises this critical stress hormone. When stress becomes chronic, the levels of cortisol remain elevated, and we start to see some negative consequences in terms of our health.

**Stress and Digestion**

When our bodies are under this type of strain, we use our energy to deal with the fear instead of using it for proper digestion, sleep and fighting sickness and infection. All of these factors work together and translate into bloating, diarrhea, gas, stomach pain, and constipation. For many, the longer the stress factor continues, the worse these symptoms may appear. It is the effect on the bowl that ties stress and irritable bowel syndrome together.

It also appears that chronic stress that has been experienced before the age of 18 may be associated with an increased occurrence of IBS.  Identifying and addressing what exactly those specific sources of stress are in the lives of clients is the first step in understanding how to alleviate symptoms.



**How to Manage Stress**

Exercise

One of the best ways to manage stress and have a positive impact on the symptoms associated with IBS is to exercise. Regular exercise can improve your mood and boost self-confidence as well as relax you and decrease the symptoms associated with mild depression and anxiety. Increased activity can also improve your sleep, which is often disrupted by stress. Better sleep may result in better management of your IBS.

Other physiological advantages are that exercise provides increased colonic motility and transit time. The activity doesn’t seem to impact bloating, but it does change gas transit, so exercise may help some patients who struggle with this symptom.

One hundred fifty minutes of moderate to intense exercise is what is needed to help alleviate symptoms of stress-related IBS.  As with any type of exercise, if you haven’t been active in a while, it’s best to check in with your doctor to make sure you are starting with movement that is safe for you. Brisk walking, running, biking, inline skating, swimming, yoga, or simple home workouts are all good options to relieve stress and get into a workout regimen.

The mental and neurochemical benefits of exercise cannot be overstated. By moving more, there may be a reduction in levels of the body’s stress hormones and stimulation of endorphins which are natural painkillers and also elevate mood. People who exercise regularly report feeling less anxious. In clinical settings, exercise is even prescribed to treat nervous tension and stress.

People who are active regularly tend to eat more high quality, nutritious food. When you eat better, you tend to feel better, and proper nutrition further helps to manage stress more effectively.

Listen to Music

Listening to relaxing music may reduce stress levels, and in turn, may alleviate symptoms of IBS. “Music Therapy” uses music to promote healing and improve one’s overall emotional well-being. This includes not only listening to music but also playing a musical instrument or singing along to the music. Research indicates that music may stimulate the production of endorphins. This stimulation can result in improved blood flow and blood pressure which can relieve stress by reducing levels of cortisol.

Meditate

Mindful meditation not only reduces stress but symptoms associated with IBS. Mindful meditation techniques are designed to promote relaxation, develop compassion, patience, generosity, and forgiveness. It is meant to help calm a person and to promote an overall sense of well being while simultaneously engaging in the everyday activities of life.

According to one study, mindfulness training and meditation had a substantial positive effect on the severity of IBS sufferers, and the benefits were seen up to 3 months after the study had ended. Mindfulness training had reduced the severity of IBS symptoms, improved quality of life, and reduced the distress of the subjects.

Interested in giving mindfulness meditation a try? Here are ten simple steps to help you get started:

1. Choose a quiet, dimly lit location.
2. Sit with your back straight. You should be erect, but comfortable. This position will keep you from dozing off and will enable you to breathe deeply and easily.
3. You can meditate sitting on a chair with your feet flat on the floor, or you can sit down on a padded floor mat.
4. You can also kneel on a mat or sit on a low bench with your legs tucked under. Choose a position that is most comfortable for you.
5. Place your hands in your lap or on your knees. Again, choose a position that is comfortable.
6. Close your eyes. Many people leave their eyes open just a crack and let their vision go out of focus. Do what feels most comfortable for you.
7. Your mouth should be closed. Breathe through your nose.
8. Inhale slowly and deeply. Exhale slowly. Do this several times.
9. Concentrate on relaxing your body in stages.
10. Begin to breathe slowly and rhythmically until you feel your body relax.



**Nutrition and Stress Relief**

Eating at relatively the same time every day and focusing on small, frequent meals will help to regulate your bowels and ease digestion. Planning meals and snacks ahead of time can also relieve stress. When you have set aside a specified amount of time to sit and eat, you can unwind and make mealtimes relaxing.

Along with this, be sure to include foods with fiber, a variety of vegetables and whole grains such as oats, teff, and quinoa.  Fibre will help to move food through the intestinal tract. It is essential to go slowly and eat smaller meals so as not to overload the body and cause the symptoms to worsen. Remember to drink plenty of water with high fiber foods to avoid becoming constipated.

Practicing these techniques to reduce stress may have a positive impact on symptoms and hopefully improve the quality of life for sufferers of IBS. It may take some time, but if you are consistent, you will likely see positive results and gain relief.

References

Mindfulness training reduces the severity of irritable bowel syndrome in women: results of a randomized controlled trial. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21691341