IBS in Women Versus IBS in Men

by ANGELA FINLAY

How IBS in Women Manifests Differently Than in Men

Digestive problems are unfortunately widespread, and they don't discriminate — both women and men suffer from the cramping, constipation, bloating, pain, and diarrhea that are the hallmarks of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). On the other hand, not everyone will face the same struggle, and that can make diagnosis and treatment difficult.

From hormones to pain receptors, several factors might explain the gender differences. There's still a lot to learn about how the female and male experiences differ, but in the meantime, there are a few facts that can help you manage *your* IBS better.

What the Studies Say

There is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that men and women experience IBS differently, which has prompted researchers to look a little deeper. In recent decades, studies have sought to determine how symptoms differ and why, in an effort to improve diagnosis and treatment of the condition.

Different Sets of Symptoms

In 2010, one team evaluated the data of recent studies to see whether there was a measurable difference, paying particular attention to how menstrual cycles and menopausal phases might contribute to IBS symptoms.

After the team combed through 22 studies that measured gender difference in IBS, they found women were more likely to report abdominal pain and constipation, and men were more likely to complain of diarrhea-related discomfort.

More Women Suffer From IBS

When you look through the research, one fact becomes clear: far more women than men appear to experience IBS. Often, these studies don't have an equal gender representation — some have more than twice as many women enrolled as men.

But not only are women more likely to suffer from IBS, they're also more likely to experience it more severely (especially when constipation is prevalent). One study following IBS patients in Cedars-Mount Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles found the participants whose constipation was much more severe than their diarrhea were most often women.

Hormonal Changes Affect IBS in Women (but Not Men)

Everybody will go through hormonal shifts at certain times, or in response to environmental factors. However, research suggests that only women will experience a surge in their IBS symptoms when hormones are in flux.

Not surprisingly, symptoms generally increase right before menstruation begins each month.

Although it's difficult to explain just why female GI tracts respond so much stronger to hormones, one theory rests on gut sensitivity: experts suspect that estrogen may increase pain sensitivity in the intestines, which means that men could be naturally less prone to pain and discomfort in the digestive tract.

How Gender Differences Affect Treatment

Although the current ROME III diagnostic criteria were designed to be gender-neutral, men and women aren't always on an even playing field when it comes to IBS diagnosis and treatment. In general, women suffer more from IBS, but also seek medical help more often than men.

Men might not struggle with IBS to the same degree, but also aren't inclined to participate in studies, or take such proactive role in their diagnosis and management.

The Psychological Element

In America, fewer men seek help for IBS than women do (the opposite is true in Eastern countries), which means more men can go longer with intestinal inflammation, and all the unfortunate symptoms that come along with it.

It seems cultural differences can play a role in medical care, especially when it comes to embarrassing disorders.

In North America, there is still quite a bit of stigma surrounding certain weaknesses, and how they interact with male strength and independence. On the other hand, women are more likely to see their doctor for any physical discomfort, and take treatment advice.

Different Responses to Medication

Some pain relievers prescribed for IBS pain seem to work different in men than they do in women. While men tend to experience fewer side effects from opiates, they may not get the same level of pain relief from the drugs as women do.

As for non-invasive psychological therapies, any IBS sufferer can benefit from guided relaxation and behavioral control, but some experts in the field suspect men may not respond as well to hypnotherapy for IBS as women.

The Bottom Line

Although women represent a much larger segment of IBS patients, men certainly aren't immune to it, and whatever your gender, you risk a big drop in your quality of life if you don't get the advice and treatment you need.

Since the major aspects of IBS affect both women and men, smart lifestyle and diet adjustments are the first step for everyone. It's also vital you overcome the "embarrassment" factor, and work with your doctor to learn how to calm your body and live more comfortably with your sensitive gut.