Avoiding IBS Triggers

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Knowing your triggers and taking precautions

IBS may involve the digestive tract, but as sufferers know, it can affect the entire body and interfere with every aspect of your health. Avoiding your IBS triggers will become a top priority when the condition begins to dictate your routine, and that can bring frustration. For most people, there are all sorts of triggers, and it can seem like nothing is definite or consistent. However, some careful attention to your diet, stress patterns, and medication may reveal important – and avoidable – triggers that could help you to prevent IBS flare-ups.

Understanding Common IBS triggers

IBS is a fairly personal condition; no two sufferers will have precisely the same reactions to any given trigger. However, there are some common triggers that tap into your emotional and physical wellbeing, and the sooner you can reduce their impact, the sooner you can overcome the cycle of IBS symptoms.

- **Stress.** It's no secret that the effects of stress can be felt all over the body, and the GI tract is no exception. A large part of the population report that stress brings on abdominal pain and bloating, so for those with IBS, the pain and inflammation can be exceptionally bad.Since a tense, contracted stomach can obviously lead to greater bowel distress, progressive muscle relaxation is a good way to ease the discomfort. Beginning at your feet, focus on tensing and immediately relaxing that specific group of muscles. Then, move slowly up your body and do the same tensing and relaxing at each new muscle group, ending with your face. Many people find immediate, noticeable relief once they get the hang of this relaxation technique.
- **Social anxiety.** IBS tends to exacerbate anxiety, which then leads to frequent and worsening IBS episodes. The cycle can be embarrassing and isolating, and in some cases, it can lead to depression.Speaking with a therapist may seem like an extreme measure, but it can be a fantastic step to better self-control and less damaging anxiety. A good therapist will lend a compassionate and trustworthy ear, and provide helpful strategies, like biofeedback or cognitive behavioural therapy techniques, to overcome anxious moments. With the right help, your confidence will increase as your ability to control your symptoms increases, and soon you'll find yourself in a new, positive anti-anxiety cycle.
- **Fiber.** For IBS constipation, increasing fiber can be an important part of the solution. A gradual increase should help to ease constipation without causing too much uncomfortable gas and cramping, so aim to add some more or new fiber-rich foods like whole grains, flax and most vegetables over the course of a few weeks. Since some other foods, like refined grains and dairy products, tend to act as road blocks to digestive health, you can simultaneously reduce these as you focus more on fiber intake.However, if your IBS brings diarrhea more often than constipation, too much fiber – especially the insoluble variety -- can spell trouble. In this case, you should aim for a moderate amount of soluble fiber (found in oats, barley, pasta, and the flesh of fruits and vegetables but not the skins) to add bulk to your stool, and moderate the size and temperature of your meals to avoid shocking your bowels.
- **The danger foods**. Some foods have been known to trigger IBS symptoms, so it is wise to avoid them. Chocolate, sugar substitutes, cruciferous vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts and cabbage),

beans and dairy products are common culprits, and although many of these provide needed nutrients, you shouldn’t have a problem finding good substitutes. Many people find that yogurt cooperates better than milk, and other green veggies can bring the vitamin C, vitamin K and vital minerals that you get from broccoli and its cousins.

Patience and Proactivity for Better IBS Management

IBS is a chronic disorder, and whatever approach you take, it’s important to realize that nothing will eradicate your condition overnight. For most sufferers, IBS is a lifelong struggle and the aim is to control the symptoms rather than cure the condition. But don’t get discouraged – there’s plenty that you can do to ease the burden on your daily routine, boost your self-confidence, and enjoy an active and happy social life.

Preparation is a major key to dealing with IBS symptoms swiftly and easily, so plan ahead for each day and any special event. Give yourself extra time in the morning if your IBS tends to act up in the morning, and modify your driving route to include more potential bathroom stops on any lengthy trip. A meal at a restaurant or event can be particularly tricky, but you can find out ahead of time what exactly is on the menu, so you know whether to eat beforehand instead of risking the stomach ache that could come with certain ingredients.

Medication can be a trigger or remedy for IBS, so you may need to work with your doctor for some time to find the right treatment plan for you. Oral contraceptives, tricyclic antidepressants, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD) drugs can trigger or worsen IBS attacks, but some newer drugs may be able to help your IBS and relieve other pain or mental health conditions. Be sure to visit your doctor periodically to discuss new medication options that could work well with your unique IBS case.