



How Much Do You Know About Stress and IBS?

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Stress and IBS: Breaking the Cycle Feeding Your Tummy Troubles

If you've visited a doctor about your irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), you've probably heard a good deal of helpful advice — and some of it can be fairly difficult to follow. Eliminating certain foods is tough, but it's a straightforward request with clear steps to follow. In contrast, getting rid of the stress in your life is a lot easier said than done.

Stress is a top cause of IBS flare-ups, and since it's virtually inescapable, it can be the biggest hurdle to overcome in your day-to-day IBS management. Don't let stress curtail all your hard work on your health and habits.

Instead, focus more effort on preventing it from building up, and reduce your general stress level each day with proven techniques that can calm your mind and digestion.

How Does Stress Impact Digestion and IBS?

Stress can really interfere with your thoughts and feelings, so you might assume that it's an emotional response with emotional consequences. In reality, stress is both physically and psychologically pervasive — it sparks a chain reaction that alters your hormonal response, muscle function, and general physiological function.

Your Gut Reaction

IBS heightens sensitivity in your intestines — it makes small digestive events more pronounced, and reactions become less predictable. While every IBS sufferer has a unique set of triggers, external and internal stress is a universal problem.

Experts don't entirely understand how anxiety, stress and IBS are related, or which comes first, but there is an undeniable connection. In fact, about 60 percent of IBS patients meet the criteria for a psychological condition that is intimately connected to chronic stress. Leading theories suggest that the brain sends out signals in response to stress, which wreaks havoc on the digestive tract, causing more stress, and the cycle continues.

Sourcing Your Stress

When IBS is at play, stress can increase motility in the colon (leading to diarrhea) and increase sensation (resulting in pain, cramping, and general gut discomfort). Obviously, you want to avoid these problems, so you need to spot the stress early and stop it at its source.

Stressors come in all sorts of shapes and sizes: a sudden traumatic event can activate the fight-or-flight response, but an illness, your diet, hormonal changes or physical exertion can also send your body into stress mode.

If your job is sapping your energy and taxing your patience, definitely consider ways to make changes at work. However, keep your mind open and tune into all areas of your life to pinpoint any stressors that may be hiding in unlikely forms.

How to Cope With Stress and IBS Together

Your habits will have the greatest effect on your mind and body, so build better ones. IBS is unpredictable, and probably won't respect your schedule, but adjusting the rest of your routine can impact how and when symptoms impact your days.

Here's how you can deal with stress and IBS:

Regular Exercise

Physical exertion is a bit of a paradox: while strenuous activity can physically stress the body, it's also one of the quickest and most effective ways to relieve stress. Some people with IBS find that too much activity speeds digestion up too much; if you're prone to diarrhea, you may want to keep the intensity low.

However, virtually everyone will experience remarkable stress-relieving benefits when they include three to four workouts a week, and be sure to get more activity into every day.

Healthy Social Connection

If your IBS stress is interfering with your ability to carry on your relationships and responsibilities, you might consider talking to a professional therapist. Simply talking to a non-judgemental stranger can be a simple way to unburden yourself of thoughts and anxieties, but targeted psychological therapies like hypnosis and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) have proven helpful for IBS, too.

Of course, you can keep things casual by joining a support group instead, or making a weekly date to chat with an understanding friend. The key is to share your thoughts and feelings — keeping things to yourself can encourage your stress to build up inside.

Treating Yourself

When you're feeling bad physically, and you seem to be losing your emotional control, it's easy to neglect your own needs and desires. Your self-esteem may start to suffer, and you might decide you don't deserve a reward for how you're living, but this is a dangerous way of thinking — don't fall under that heavy self-judgment.

Treating yourself to little moments (or longer stretches) of enjoyment is precisely what you need to reset and recharge your self-confidence and control. Any activity that gives you peace of mind, some time to relax, and a genuine sense of joy can be therapeutic, as long as it isn't damaging to your body.

Complementary Therapy

Massage, acupuncture, guided meditation, and biofeedback are all considered complementary therapies for disruptive physical disorders. While very severe cases of IBS may call for medication, at least periodically, many people have found that adding a weekly massage or acupuncture session to the mix does wonders for their symptoms.

Not surprisingly, many of these complementary therapies revolve around rest and deep relaxation, which of course helps on both the psychological and physical levels.

Forcing a Relaxation Response

General adjustments to your daily or weekly routine are vital for a calmer existence, but you'll also need some

coping mechanisms to handle acute attacks of stress and anxiety.

When a stressful events winds you up, try these techniques to release the tension:

- **Deep breathing.** Slowing and deepening your breath will slow your heart rate, which brings some immediate relief. Matching your inhale to your exhale is also a meditative practice that can overcome nagging feelings of anxiety before they blossom into a panic attack.
- **Aromatherapy.** When stress is the issue, you could lean on the calming aroma of lavender to slow down brain wave activity, or use Roman camomile oil to ease muscle tension and decrease restlessness. Clary sage, bergamot, jasmine and sweet marjoram are other options.
- **Live in the moment.** Focusing on one very specific element or interaction with your surroundings can provide a distraction from discomfort and lift up your attitude. When you focus on your senses, your tension will begin to fade into the background.

Stress is a variable beast with a huge reach, but there are hundreds of ways to evade and overcome it. If you've had little luck with the stress relief techniques recommended by your friends, family or doctors, dig around a bit to see what else might be out there.

The more you can connect to others who share your challenges and understand your concerns, the more likely you'll be able to compile a creative strategy that works for you.