

Stress & IBS

For many people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), stress can be a trigger to symptoms or at least a contributing factor. "Stress – feeling mentally or emotionally tense, troubled, angry, or overwhelmed – can stimulate colon spasms in people with IBS. The colon has many nerves that connect it to the brain. Like the heart and the lungs, the colon is partly controlled by the autonomic nervous system, which responds to stress. These nerves control the normal contractions of the colon and cause abdominal discomfort at stressful times. People often experience cramps or "butterflies" when they are nervous or upset. In people with IBS, the colon can be overly responsive to even slight conflict or stress. Stress makes the mind more aware of the sensations that arise in the colon, making the person perceive these sensations as unpleasant."¹ "Learning to reduce stress can help with IBS."²

"Some evidence [also] suggests that IBS is affected by the immune system, which fights infection in the body. The immune system is affected by stress. For all these reasons, stress management is an important part of treatment for IBS."¹

Stress management can begin with small changes in behavior and lifestyle, such as:

- exercising on a regular basis;
- being sure to get enough sleep;
- spending time doing a hobby;
- eating a healthy diet;
- talking with a friend; or
- reading a book, listening to music, taking a warm bath, or other relaxing activity.^{3,4}

Psychological counseling, including cognitive behavioral therapy, dynamic psychotherapy, or

hypnotherapy may be another helpful step to stress management.⁵

For more ideas on how to identify, avoid, reduce, or manage the stress in your life, see *HealthHints: [Stress – Changing the way we react.](#)*



Sources

1. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (2007). Irritable bowel syndrome [on-line]. Retrieved December 2, 2008. From <http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/ibs>.
2. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (2007). What I need to know about irritable bowel syndrome [on-line]. Retrieved December 1, 2008. From http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/ibs_ez/.
3. American College of Gastroenterology (2006). Common GI problems: Volume 2 [on-line]. Retrieved January 6, 2008. From <http://www.acg.gi.org/patients/cgp/cgppv2.asp#IBS>.
4. WebMD (2008) Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) guide: Stress, anxiety, and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) [on-line]. Retrieved December 1, 2008. From <http://www.webmd.com/ibs/guide/stress-anxiety-ibs>.
5. American College of Gastroenterology IBS Task Force. *An Evidence-Based Position Statement on the Management of Irritable Bowel Syndrome*. *American Journal of Gastroenterology* 2009:S1-S35.

