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There is Hope for People with IBS

IBS, or irritable bowel syndrome, was unheard of ten years ago, but is now a household name to many people. It is the name given to those with unexplainable chronic abdominal pain, bloating and irregular, loose bowel movements. Although diagnosis with IBS is extremely common (about 20% of the population), there is no tried and true treatment available from medical doctors, and it causes great suffering. Why is there is no truly helpful treatment? There are no detectable structural abnormalities to treat when blood and imaging studies like x-ray and ultrasound are done. According to most sources, "IBS is a diagnosis of exclusion", which means no signs of other diseases are found. Fortunately for those with mysterious irritable bowel syndrome, Naturopathic Medicine addresses and treats functional problems and symptoms as it resolves IBS.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome has many causes. I refer to it as a disorder of the digestive, nervous and immune systems, which are all interconnected, and can affect each other when unbalanced. Determining the contributing causes in each person is essential in order for them to recover from symptoms and heal. One common trigger of IBS is food "sensitivities", officially called type 3 delayed hypersensitivity reactions. These slow (24-72 hour) food reactions are different from traditional allergies, technically called type 1 immediate hypersensitivity reactions, which cause recognizable symptoms on the spot like hives, sinus congestion, difficulty breathing, and anaphylaxis. Repeated exposure to food sensitivities triggers an immune reaction that aggravates the bowels and causes inflammation in the tissue of the colon. These food reactions can be tested for by an easy blood stick test to provide a list of foods that a person is reacting to and to what degree.

A second factor in IBS is poor bacterial balance in the small and large colons. As I've mentioned in previous articles, balancing the good and bad bacteria, fungi and yeast species is absolutely essential for good digestive function and health. Good bacteria are frequently damaged by a diet high in sugars and alcohol and low in fibre, and by inflammation. Stress is another major contributor. Stress causes the nervous system to go into overdrive, producing brain chemicals and immune cells that create more inflammation and spasm, leading to worsening symptoms.

While the causes and contributors of IBS are unique to every individual, treatments that help one person may not help the next person as effectively. In an initial Naturopathic health assessment, all of the body's systems that may be out of order are examined, since the whole person is treated. Treatments might involve calming down the nervous and immune systems with the right species of bacteria, herbs or breathing techniques, or supporting proper elimination of inflammatory chemicals by the liver and kidneys. Acupuncture and homeopathy can be great for normalizing the tissue and function of the colon and stomach too, with few side effects, and ND's are trained in these specialties. Naturopathic Doctors can relieve symptoms and help to establish remission and true healing patterns. The time for improvement with Naturopathic Medicine varies, but improvements are rapid when patients are committed to making health promoting changes.



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In a study involving 20 patients (15 female, 5 male) with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), whose condition had not improved with standard medical therapies, participants undergoing a Food Elimination Diet (where common food sensitivities were not eaten for a trial period), followed by a probiotic supplementation was found to significantly improve symptoms of IBS, including improved stool frequency, less pain, and overall improved quality of life¹.

Naturopathic treatments for IBS enhance health and also decrease patients' risk of diseases such as colon cancer, acne and eczema and other stress related conditions such as ulcers and migraines. Digestive issues require whole body treatments, and are an area of health where naturopathic medicine surpasses conventional medicine with treatments.

People with IBS may be interested in the books *Dangerous Grains* and *Eating Alive*. Relaxation techniques, yoga and meditation are imperative lifestyle changes to make.

1. "Treating irritable bowel syndrome with a food elimination diet followed by food challenge and probiotics," Drisko J, Bischoff B, et al, *J Am Coll Nutr*, 2006; 25(6): 514-22.