

APPENDIX

IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME INFOPACK

INFORMATION SECTION

- What is stress?
- How can stress affect Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)?

WHAT IS STRESS

Stress affects one's thoughts, actions and body. Stress affects all sorts of people, anyone and everyone—young and old, male and female, rich or poor.

However, most people would rather have a 'real' problem like a broken leg than acknowledge their stress. It is important to know that you are not weak, mad or stupid because you have stress.

Just like how one can probably hide his/her stress from others, often people won't accept or are not happy to admit stress is a big problem in their lives. We all know that not everyone copes well with stress.

Often, the worst critic is you yourself. There is no magic cure for stress. Rather, this infopack teaches you to control stress, not get rid of it. As we said earlier, stress affects everyone and is part and parcel of life. So let's aim to manage it.

HOW CAN STRESS AFFECT IBS?

Stress can be broken up into three parts: T A B. T stands for Thoughts, A stands for Actions and B stands for Body.

When a person is under stress, he/she usually worries about things that *might* happen. For instance, "What if my stomach pain gets worse? What if it leads to something more serious?"

When a person is under stress, he/she usually engages in some actions such as avoiding (making decisions, taking responsibility, going out socially) and behaviours (checking too much, always rushed and trying to do too many things at one time).

When a person is under stress, he/she usually goes to their GP first complaining of physical symptoms. Our bodies respond to stress with a vast range of symptoms. Some people may be more prone than others to certain ones. Common bodily symptoms include rapid heart rate, sleeping problems, diarrhoea, constipation, and nausea.

Research has shown that IBS is related to heightened gut motility (muscle contraction), sensation, or both. The gut shares many nerve pathways and chemical transmitters with the brain.

While we now know IBS is not caused by stress, we know that stress may further aggravate bowel symptoms. Research has also indicated that if persons with IBS also suffer from depression and/or anxiety, their bowel symptoms may get worse during episodes of depression and anxiety. There is an interaction of various factors (such as biological make-up, childhood experiences and coping skills) causing one to be more likely than another to become stressed in the face of different environmental stressors. It is likely that IBS is due to an interaction between biological tendencies and environmental stressors. If an individual has a biological vulnerability to gastrointestinal disorders (e.g. hypersensitive gut), environmental factors such as food sensitivities, stressful life events that result in acute or chronic states of arousal can 'tip them over the edge', resulting in chronic bowel problems.

TREATMENT SECTION

- Quick control
- Additional resources

QUICK CONTROL

Managing stress is usually a long, slow business. Here are some quick ways to control stress: Distraction, Exercise, Talking and Breathing.

Distraction

Try to clear your mind as much as possible. Think of a word or phrase e.g. 'I am in control', 'Relax'. Close your eyes and slowly repeat the word/phrase in your mind over and over again. Do this for ten minutes each day or whenever you are under stress. If unwanted thoughts come into your mind, just notice them, then redirect your attention back to the exercise.

Exercise

Studies have found that exercise helps to improve mood. It also helps you get out of the house and lets you meet new people.

Talking

Talking to a trusted friend or loved one often can allow you to release the stress.

Breathing

Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach (just above your belly button). As you breathe in through your nose, the hand on your stomach should be pushed out while the hand on your chest should not move. As you breathe out through your nose, your stomach should pull in. Your chest should not move.

We can also learn to put our stressful thoughts on trial. The first step is to identify your stressful thoughts. The second step is to look for evidence for the thoughts, then search for evidence against the thoughts. The final step is to sum up all the evidence and come to your own conclusions. IBS is not a life-threatening, chronic illness. It may recur over one's lifetime but it does not cause permanent harm to the intestines. For many people, having a proper diet and managing stress will help to alleviate the symptoms.