



# PSYCH NOTES™

*Courtesy of*

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Volume 1 Issue 2

## WHAT IS IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?

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Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a term used to describe interferences with the normal functioning of the large intestines and colon. Symptoms of IBS may include cramping, bloating, gas, and/or mucus in the stool. In addition, individuals who suffer from IBS often experience constipation, diarrhea, or alternating periods of each. Irritable Bowel Syndrome affects as many as 1 in 5 people, occurring more frequently in women than men. Although IBS can affect people at any age, symptoms generally begin during adolescence or young adulthood and often persist in the absence of effective interventions.

### *What Causes IBS?*

At the present time, research has not conclusively determined a cause of IBS. Studies have, however, indicated that stress and diet each play an important role in the development of IBS symptoms. Many nerves connect the colon to the brain. Like other organs, the colon is partially controlled by the autonomic nervous system, which controls our responses to stress. For example, when a person feels stressed or frightened, the autonomic nervous system makes their heart beat faster, increases their breathing rate, and produces sweat to keep the body cool. The autonomic nervous system produces similar responses in the colon. In response to brain signals, the colon may produce contractions that are too strong or weak, and may absorb too much or too little water. These processes, in turn, lead to the abdominal pain, discomfort, and other symptoms experienced by individuals with IBS. Learning relaxation methods and other strategies to manage stress can be very helpful in relieving these symptoms.

### *What is the Treatment for IBS?*

Although no cure is currently available for IBS, many effective options are available to help manage the symptoms. Your doctor can suggest the most appropriate treatments given your particular symptoms, and will likely encourage dietary changes and stress management. Some suggestions that may help relieve symptoms of IBS include:

- relaxation strategies that can help you manage stress, such as deep breathing, visualization, and progressive muscle relaxation,
- consultation with psychologists specializing in the management of stress and anxiety,
- attending support groups in your area,
- avoiding fatty foods, as well as gas-producing foods (i.e., beans, cabbage, etc.),
- limiting consumption of caffeine, alcohol, and carbonated beverages,
- drinking 8 glasses of water daily as well as increasing fiber intake and,
- exercising regularly.

Remember that IBS is an extremely common disorder that affects predominantly women. Most people can control their symptoms by changing their diets and learning strategies to cope with stress in their lives. Effective treatments and interventions are available by qualified professionals to help reduce the debilitating effects such symptoms can have on individuals suffering from IBS.

*Dr. Stacey Devaux is an Associate Psychologist with East End Psychological Services, P.C., in Miller Place, NY. Dr. Devaux received her degree from Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY, where she conducted research on the transmission of anxiety between generations and within intimate relationships. Dr. Devaux specializes in the identification and treatment of anxiety disorders, particularly generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias, separation anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), in all populations. Dr. Devaux can be reached at East End Psychological Services, P.C., 565 Route 25A, Suite 201, Miller Place, NY 11764 or call (631) 821-7214.*