

Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A Non-Medication Alternative Jewel Sommerville, D.Ac.

Affecting 1 in 5 Americans, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) is one of the most common disorders diagnosed (<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov>). IBS is not a disease but a functional disorder primarily of the bowel (meaning the bowel is not working properly). There are three common types of IBS: IBS with constipation, IBS with diarrhea or IBS that alternates between the two. Other symptoms can include but are not limited to: bloating, abdominal pain, gas and/or bowel movements that feel difficult, incomplete or urgent. These symptoms can severely disrupt daily living leading to missed work, isolation, travel limitations and increased social anxiety.

Prescription medications are available to the patient suffering from IBS; however, the effectiveness of these medications tends to be lower than the average medication prescribed for other disorders. In addition, IBS medication is often prescribed for short-term use only and patients are often concerned with the possibility of unwanted side effects. These factors leave many patients suffering from this disorder feeling helpless and hopeless.

Patients suffering from IBS commonly ask two questions: 1. “Can this disorder lead to other more severe complications/problems?” and 2. “What other alternatives for treatment are available?”

It is important for patients to know the answer to both of these questions. First, conventional medical research has *not* linked IBS to the development of more serious diseases, such as cancer, *nor* has IBS proven to cause damage to the bowel (<http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov>). Second, there are many other non-medication based treatment options available, including East Asian Medicine.

East Asian Medicine (acupuncture, Chinese herbs and dietary recommendations based on Traditional Chinese Medical theories and diagnoses) offers IBS sufferers a natural, less invasive approach to health and well-being. In most cases one, if not all, of the above-mentioned modalities are applied for the best result.

After an initial evaluation by the East Asian Medical practitioner, a treatment plan is developed based on the chronicity and severity of the IBS. The more chronic and/or the more severe the IBS, the more treatment needed. A common treatment regimen for a long-term IBS sufferer would include acupuncture, dietary recommendations and, in some cases, Chinese herbal prescriptions.

Acupuncture might include 2 treatments weekly for six weeks and then lessen the frequency of treatments to one weekly for the next few months. The goal is to continually decrease the frequency of treatment while maintaining the positive results. Most IBS sufferers will eventually decrease to a maintenance plan, averaging one treatment monthly.

East and West agree that diet plays a crucial role in controlling IBS symptoms. Both recommend refraining from certain foods (alcohol, dairy products, fried foods, etc.). However, many of the recommendations from an East Asian Medical perspective differ greatly from the Western approach primarily because the recommendations are based on the individual's needs and Chinese diagnosis(es). Therefore, not all IBS sufferers will be given the same list of foods to add or delete from their diet.

Finally, Chinese herbs, all natural substances given in the form of a tea or pill, are sometimes prescribed. Herbal prescriptions for IBS are typically used to further enhance the effects of the acupuncture treatments and are not prescribed long-term. The benefits of herbal prescriptions over conventional prescriptions include little to no side effects (the body can more easily "breakdown" a natural substance versus a chemically based medication) and herbal prescriptions, like the dietary recommendations, are tailored to the individual.

East Asian Medicine is a less invasive, effective approach to a terribly disruptive disorder. It is important for patients suffering from IBS to know there are other alternatives available in the medical community that offer long-lasting results with little to no pain while avoiding possible medication side effects and/or dependence.

Western medicine has not yet fully explained the etiology of this disorder but recent research has linked serotonin to normal Gastrointestinal (GI) functioning. Serotonin, is a neurotransmitter closely linked with depression and other mood-related disorders.

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