

Irritable Bowel Syndrome - IBS



Up to 15% of the population suffer from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). For a quarter of these sufferers, the symptoms are severe and current pharmaceutical management can be less than satisfactory.

Fortunately a realistic treatment alternative is available. Acupuncture's well-established anti-inflammatory effect has particular relevance for IBS; and Chinese Herbal Medicine has a long history in treatment of gastro-intestinal disorders.

What is IBS?

The main symptoms are abdominal pain and/or bloating with chronic diarrhoea or constipation, often alternating between the two. These symptoms can be episodic, with the patient sometimes experiencing intermittent relief or fluctuations in severity. Other symptoms are excessive wind or gas, mucus in the stool, urgency and tenesmus (a distressing feeling of incompleteness after moving the bowels).

What Causes IBS?

IBS is defined as a syndrome without any known organic disorder. In other words, medical science doesn't know what triggers it. IBS can only be diagnosed by considering a patient's presentation of symptoms after eliminating any other potential causes such as inflammatory bowel disease or cancer.

- Science postulates a series of potential aetiological pathways such as:
- disruption of normal gastro-intestinal motility
- disruption of communication between the brain and the GI tract
- hormonal changes (70% of IBS sufferers are women)
- hypersensitive gut nerves
- changes in intestinal bacteria

IBS and Diet

Many people are able to identify specific foods to which appear to initiate a hypersensitive reaction. Gluten or wheat products, dairy foods, citrus, beans, cabbage, fizzy drinks, fried food and alcohol have all been reported to trigger IBS symptoms or make them distinctly worse. If you can identify and eliminate foods you are certain are causing you trouble, that will go a long way towards making your life more tolerable. However this is very much an individual exploration; the role of food allergies in IBS isn't fully understood.

IBS and Stress

Until fairly recently, IBS was regarded as purely a psycho-emotional disorder. The shorthand for that is: "It's all in your mind" which can be a bit of an insult to otherwise healthy people. An unfortunate result of that attitude was that a lot of anti-depressant medication was unnecessarily prescribed over many years. Having said that, a high

correlation between IBS and anxiety clearly exists. The problem is, it's impossible to say with certainty which comes first. Having chronic diarrhoea or constipation is not a recipe for happiness!

Management of IBS

IBS can usually be managed with dietary modifications, stress management and the maintenance of a regular sleep/rest/exercise cycle. Pharmaceutical options are limited to treatment of specific aspects of the syndrome. For instance, there are a range of specific medications to target constipation or diarrhoea; antispasmodic drugs can be used to control intestinal muscle spasms; and antidepressants are still widely used in an attempt to alleviate anxiety and depression. However there is no single drug that will eliminate IBS symptoms entirely and a pharmaceutical approach is something to be managed closely by a medical doctor.

Chinese Medicine's View of IBS

As with all conditions, Chinese Medicine (CM) applies an individualised diagnosis to determine the exact pattern of disharmony. CM considers the relative strength or deficiency of the internal organs and also takes into consideration the internal ecological environment: the presence of heat, cold, dampness, dryness and wind can each be a significant contributor to IBS symptoms.

In many ways, CM's view on IBS is very similar to that of Western Medicine, it looks to regulate the action of the gastrointestinal tract and to harmonise the Liver and Spleen, which in plain language can be translated as 'reducing stress to maximise digestive function'.

How Acupuncture Helps with IBS

Acupuncture modulates the autonomic nervous system. Whenever an acupuncture needle is inserted, a number of different things start to happen. The body interprets the presence of an acupuncture needle as a challenge to its integrity and an immune response is initiated. This involves:

- activation of the parasympathetic nervous system to promote relaxation
- production of endorphines, the body's own pain relieving factors
- production of anti-inflammatory factors
- promotion of the local circulation of blood
- reduction of tension in the muscle structure

All of these things serve to optimise tissue function, both locally and systemically, and to regulate the motility of the gastro-intestinal tract.

Chinese Herbs and IBS

Chinese Medicine uses a vast pharmacopeia of plant and mineral substances, classified according to flavour and temperature, to optimise the internal environment. Cold, bitter herbs reduce inflammation; warm, nourishing herbs tonify the internal organs; aromatic herbs promote free circulation of blood and disperse pathogenic accumulations. Certain herb categories will clear excess damp or act as laxatives. Others will regulate the stomach or relax intestinal muscles.

A Chinese Herbal Medicine Practitioner will construct a specific formula to target your exact internal condition.

The Research on Acupuncture and IBS

Current research is showing acupuncture to have a potential positive effect, though more research is needed before confident conclusions can be drawn.

In comparative effectiveness trials, patients reported greater benefits from acupuncture than from pharmacological therapies.(1)

A recent randomised controlled trial (RCT) of acupuncture as a treatment for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) demonstrated sustained benefits over a period of 12 months. (2)

Book an Appointment

Damian Carey, our Doctor of Chinese Medicine, has had many years of experience in treating Irritable Bowel Syndrome. He may be able to help you to resolve the distressing symptoms. To arrange an initial assessment and treatment, [book here](#).

1. Manheimer E, Wieland LS, Cheng K, Li SM, Shen X, Berman BM, et al. Acupuncture for irritable bowel syndrome: systematic review and meta-analysis.

The American Journal of Gastroenterology. 2012 Jun;107(6):835-47; quiz 48.

2. MacPherson H, Tilbrook H, Agbedjro D, Buckley H, Hewitt C, Frost C. Acupuncture for irritable bowel syndrome: 2-year follow-up of a randomised controlled trial.

Acupuncture in Medicine: Journal of the British Medical Acupuncture Society. 2016 Mar 15.