

Ask the Doctor—Treating Irritable Bowel Syndrome

By John Neustadt, ND

I've been diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome. My doctor has prescribed antidepressants, but I would prefer not to take drugs. What holistic treatments do you recommend for IBS?

Many natural treatments can help IBS. Meditating 30 minutes a day for just six weeks significantly decreased diarrhea, bloating, flatulence, and belching in one study. Not surprisingly, the study reported no side effects.

Dietary allergies can contribute to IBS symptoms, and eliminating them can lead to dramatic improvement as well. A recent review of dietary allergies in IBS published in *Neurogastroenterology and Motility* concluded that excluding dietary allergens can lead to an improvement in up to 71 percent of IBS sufferers.

We can identify food allergens several ways. Blood tests for IgG4 antibodies and the allergy elimination-challenge tests are the most sensitive. In an elimination-challenge test, patients follow a hypoallergenic diet for a prescribed period of time and track their symptoms in a journal. Then they methodically, and with guidance from a clinician, reintroduce foods one at a time. If symptoms return with specific foods, the patient eliminates them from her diet altogether, perhaps not forever, but for a while.

Dietary supplements, including probiotics and peppermint, can also benefit people with IBS. Probiotics, which are beneficial gut bacteria, have been the subject of multiple clinical trials of IBS. In one study, for example, volunteers received 10 billion cfu (colony forming units) of *Lactobacillus salivarius* or *Bifidobacterium infantis*, or a placebo, in a malted drink once daily. Those who took the *B. infantis* probiotic experienced a significant improvement in abdominal pain, bloating, and bowel movement difficulty or urgency.

A clinical trial has also shown that enteric-coated peppermint oil decreases pain in children with IBS. In this particular trial, 42 children received peppermint oil capsules that didn't dissolve until they were in the lower intestines (enteric coated). After two weeks, 71 percent of the volunteers in the peppermint oil group reported improvement in symptoms compared with 43 percent in the placebo group.

I respect your decision to want to investigate other, nondrug options for IBS. A combination of these therapies may provide the best long-term relief for you.