

Irritable Bowel Syndrome, often called IBS, is a malfunction in the way in which our digestive system works, or the way in which the food we eat moves through the intestine. The main symptoms include abdominal pain, and bouts of diarrhoea and constipation. The malfunction is closely related to how your intestine relates to stress and diet. IBS is surprisingly common: between 8 and 17 per cent of people in the developed world suffer from it.

People's reactions vary from healthy robust individuals who accept their symptoms and pay little attention, to others who fear moving too far away from a lavatory and have allowed their digestive system to become the focal point of their lives. People typically worry about being in situations where there is not immediate access to a toilet, which leads to anxiety which adversely affects the intestine and bowel. A vicious circle of worry leading to physical symptoms, leading to more worry and avoidance behaviour is created, very much like classical agoraphobia, but instead of worrying about having a panic attack the IBS sufferer worries about unexpected incontinence.

## ■ Managing IBS

- 1 Learn a relaxation technique:** A progressive muscle relaxation technique involving alternatively tensing and relaxing selected groups of muscles is helpful.
- 2 Progressively confront situations you have avoided:** If you start to avoid situations, such as going into new areas where you are not aware of the availability of a toilet, or driving on motorways, or going out in the morning without emptying your bowel, you are starting a slippery slope, where the more you avoid the worse your anxiety will become. Turn this process around and start to progressively confront those previously avoided situations. Draw up a hierarchy of difficult situations, rating each on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of how anxious you feel. Then start at the easiest item and confront those situations, using anxiety management techniques such as, relaxation, distraction,
- 3 Challenge those 'catastrophic' thoughts:** People with IBS tend to 'catastrophise' in a number of areas. Firstly, they over-estimate how little control they will have over their symptoms. Secondly, they exaggerate how awful the mess would be if an unexpected incontinence occurred. Thirdly, they over-estimate how much people would notice. Fourthly, they over-estimate how negatively other people will view them. Challenge these distorted catastrophic thoughts, by looking at the evidence and the consequences of thinking that way. Alternatively, rather than challenging those thoughts themselves, use the 'downward arrow technique', and constantly ask yourself, 'What would be so bad about that?' This helps you to explore your worst possible fears and to accept that once you have accepted the reality it is often not as bad as the fantasy.
- 4 Eat regular healthy meals:** Never hurry your food, eat slowly. Make time for a leisurely breakfast. Eat high-fibre, low-fat foods such as wholemeal bread, fruit, vegetables, dried fruit, lentils and beans, and drink plenty of water.
- 5 Keep physically active:** Physical activity improves body functioning and takes your mind off symptoms. Exercises that strengthen abdominal muscles, such as sit-ups, are said to be helpful.
- 6 Manage your stress:** Your symptoms maybe a signal that you are under too much stress. Look to make changes if necessary.