

## **Irritable Bowel Syndrome: An Irritating Problem!**

By Dr. Deidre Macdonald

Cathy sought out naturopathic medical care for problems with her bowels. Ten years of problems had left her drained and frustrated. She knew where all the public bathrooms were everywhere she went and lived in fear of “accidents”. She suffered from alternating constipation and diarrhea, embarrassing gas, abdominal pain and bloating and she generally felt tired and toxic. Her conventional medical doctor had done tests to rule out cancer or serious disease and labeled her symptom picture Irritable Bowel Syndrome. She was given a variety of medications to counteract her symptoms. Laxatives for constipation, anti-diarrhea medications, antacid pills all helped in the short run, but after 10 years Cathy was no closer to understanding why she felt the way she did or how she could help herself get out of this painful cycle.

Cathy’s case is not unusual. Approximately 15% of the population has Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and many more people experience similar symptoms. IBS is characterized by abdominal pain or bloating, constipation and/or diarrhea, gas, nausea, and is often accompanied by varying degrees of anxiety or depression. Since many other conditions can mimic IBS, it is important to rule out more serious diseases like cancer and colitis.

The naturopathic approach to treatment is very different from the conventional methods because our goal is very different. While conventional medicine treats symptoms with drugs, naturopathic doctors seek to understand why the body is creating these symptoms and correct the underlying imbalance. There are several potential causes of IBS that affect people in varying degrees.

The most common cause of IBS that I have observed clinically is food allergies or intolerances. With proper identification of offending foods and coaching to change the diet, many of my patients have found lasting relief from their symptoms. Another common cause of intestinal distress is a disturbance in the bacteria that line the intestine. Antibiotic use coupled with a high sugar diet can result in an overgrowth of yeast and fungus in the intestine. The result is often gas, bloating and irregular stool, as well as fatigue and other mental symptoms. This condition can be rectified by specific dietary modifications and by working to re-establish the healthy bacterial balance in the intestine.

Often IBS is a result of a poorly functioning upper digestive system. If the stomach lacks adequate hydrochloric acid, foods are not broken down properly and can cause symptoms in the lower digestion. This condition is common as we age. Symptoms to look for of low stomach acid are:

- Fullness after eating
- Belching or flatulence after meals
- Indigestion, constipation or diarrhea
- Iron deficiency
- Multiple food allergies
- Weak fingernails

I have had many patients complain of IBS after having surgery to remove their gall bladder. The gall bladder stores and regulates the secretion of bile, the fluid used to digest fats. The bile is made in the liver but if the liver is toxic, the bile it makes will also be toxic and caustic. The “toxic bile” takes its toll on the gallbladder, and the conventional solution to gall bladder problems is to simply remove it. Now that same “toxic bile” is now able to drip into the intestine in an unregulated fashion. The intestine becomes irritated by the bile and lets us know by presenting with the symptoms we call Irritable Bowel Syndrome. The naturopathic approach to this health challenge is to treat the underlying cause by detoxifying the liver to help it to make better bile.

In Cathy’s case, after a thorough physical exam, we did some blood work and tested her for food allergies and yeast overgrowth. She had taken antibiotics for a series of infections many years ago and had a significant yeast overgrowth. She was allergic to wheat, rye and bananas. She did not have a personal history of gall bladder problems, but her sister and mother had had their gall bladders removed. Cathy was coached on a program to reduce her yeast, change her diet, cleanse her liver and soothe her irritated bowel. With natural medicine alone, she became symptom free for the first time in many years. Not only did her bowels improve, she reported feeling much more energy and mental clarity. She was able to take charge of her health by getting to the root cause of the problem!