



Understanding IBS & Diverticulitis

in layman's terms

An informative and easy-to-read guide about what could be going wrong with your bowel digestion.

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INTRODUCTION

What's going on inside my abdomen to cause all this pain and discomfort? And what can I do to stop these symptoms, naturally? This little booklet is designed to help you understand why you developed IBS or diverticulitis and what you can do about it.

YOUR BOWEL IS BOTH A BARRIER AND A FILTER

Your bowel is like a long muscular tube. Its inner lining resembles a shag-pile microscopic carpet with a thick layer of mucous over it. Sitting on and around this layer of mucous are digestive enzymes, friendly and unfriendly bacteria competing for space and nutrients, and patrol cells of your immune system.

As food passes through your gut, your digestive system extracts the food molecules and lets the rest pass through, to eventually be expelled as faeces.

WHY STRESS AFFECTS YOUR BOWELS

Having a bad day? Feeling stressed about your job? While you're feeling upset, your bowel lining has stopped producing that protective mucus barrier. Not only that, but your immune system will go out on strike, and digestive enzymes just won't be produced. Why?

Actually, our genes make this happen We evolved to cope with stress by 'switching off' any body systems which didn't help us escape from whatever dinosaur or sabre-toothed tiger was chasing us When we're stressed, blood supply and energy is directed to

muscles and away from digestion (who needs to worry about digesting food when you're running for your life?) In modern times our stressors are different but they have the same effect on our body.

'Switching off' your stress response is a major pillar of IBS treatment, so that your body can start producing that protective mucous again, your immune system returns to work, and digestive enzymes are once again being secreted.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR BOWEL BECOMES INFLAMED

Ever fallen over and grazed your knee? Sure hurts, doesn't it If you had bare legs the graze is even worse.

Let's apply this scenario to your bowels. You've been feeling stressed for weeks, so

that protective mucous layer on your bowel lining just isn't present, and there are precious little digestive enzymes. Then you eat some food. Because there are almost no digestive enzymes available to break down the food particles, they travel through your gut scraping along the sides.

Now your gut wall is inflamed The cells that are usually tightly packed together swell and move apart slightly, allowing large ' molecules into your bloodstream Your immune system reacts, creating a reaction that many of us recognise as food intolerances: Brain fog, skin rashes, joint pains.

When this happens, your priority is to calm the inflammation and your immune system, and rebuild that protective mucous layer with the right bacteria.

If you don't repair the damage, inflammation can become chronic, leading to damage or even a totally flat surface with no villi (think of that shag pile carpet again). Then you can't

absorb your nutrients properly. In addition, the conditions become perfect for parasites, fungi, yeasts and bad bacteria to take over, further exacerbating your symptoms.

Often, a full-blown case of IBS symptoms can be the result of combined stress, inflammation, poor digestion, dysbiosis and parasite infestation.

HOW DO YOU KNOW SOMETHING'S WRONG?

- Your bowel movements change in form from one day to the next Sometimes all the way from watery diarrhoea to hard pellets within 24 hours.
- Your bowel movements can sometimes be 'pasty' or difficult to pass
- You see large food particles in your bowel motions that should have been digested
- After a bowel movement, you feel like you haven't evacuated completely.
- You experience pain across your abdominal region
- You have urgency with your bowel movements, sometimes to the point where you don't want to leave home 'just in case'.
- Your tummy gets increasingly bloated as the day progresses

- You have embarrassing levels of flatulence
- You have an itchy anus

It's important to see your doctor first if you have had these symptoms for more than three months: a professional diagnosis that there is nothing sinister happening is very reassuring. Then you can address what's causing the symptoms with your naturopath and utilise natural treatments.

CARRY THE RIGHT PASSENGERS (ABOUT PROBIOTICS)

We all carry a huge population of bacteria in our gut; some friendly, some harmful. They compete for space and nutrients, and in the right conditions the good bacteria maintain enough space to help us digest some vitamins, and prime our immune systems, as well as

promote the growth of that healthy layer of mucous.

'Dysbiosis' is the name given to an imbalance of our bacterial friends. Dysbiosis can become apparent in many different ways, but bloating and flatulence are common symptoms

A 'comprehensive digestive stool analysis' can reveal which bacteria are out of balance. As a result your practitioner will know which remedies to Use to redress the balance. (Sometimes testing isn't needed though.)

Probiotics are an important part of treating dysbiosis. Probiotics are literally capsules filled with millions of billions of good bacteria. Not all of them will survive their trip through your stomach, that's why there's so many in each capsule.

If you are taking antibiotics, it's important to take probiotics at the same time, and for several weeks afterwards, as the antibiotics will wipe out all the bacteria, good and bad.

This makes it too easy for the bad bacteria to take over.

Mothers, there's something important you should know about your babies. When babies are delivered vaginally, they ingest large amounts of good bacteria in their trip through the birth canal. This starts off the colonies of good bacteria they need. If your baby was delivered by caesarean section, it's important to provide a special baby probiotic to help prevent bowel problems developing later.

SMALL INTESTINE BACTERIAL OVERGROWTHS

Small intestine bacterial overgrowths (or SIBO for short) is just a fancy name for a bacterial imbalance in your bowels. Basically, the conditions in your gut have become less than friendly for your helpful bacteria, and ideal for bad bacteria. Kind of like the people

you don't want to live alongside moving into your neighbourhood. These unwanted bacteria can especially cause bloating, flatulence, and changes to your bowel motions. Apart from the unpleasant symptoms there's another reason you want to get rid of them: The good bacteria effectively help digest your food and sometimes even create vitamins. So while the bad bacteria are residing in your bowel you're becoming malnourished.

Treatment for SIBO is simple: Create the right conditions (especially pH) for the good bacteria to live, 'disinfect' your intestines using powerful herbs, and replenish stocks of good bacteria.

FODMAPS AND OTHER RESTRICTED DIETS

It's a familiar story as I listen to my client relating his or her journey with their gut problems. One of the options they've tried is the FODMAPs diet and – hey presto – their bowel symptoms have been relieved. But the FODMAPS diet is quite restrictive, curtailing intake of many foods that contain certain types of carbohydrate. And they don't want to have to eat this way forever.

Although the FODMAPs diet is effective, it has two drawbacks.

- Its restrictive nature makes eating out socially a nightmare; consume the wrong foods and the problems are back.
- In my opinion (as a naturopath), just taking away the foods causing symptoms doesn't address the underlying problem.

I've got an old-fashioned common sense viewpoint on gut disorders. Instead of having to permanently change what you eat, why not treat and rehabilitate the gut injury that's caused the symptoms? (There are limits to this generalisation, of course: If you are a diagnosed coeliac, or have ulcerative colitis or crohns disease these are conditions which simply require life-long management.)

If you're one of the people who found that the FODMAPS diet relieved your symptoms, but you have the perspective that the problem stems from an underlying gut problem, and you want to get off the FODMAPS diet, read on.

Here's what's been happening in your gut:

FODMAP stands for fructooligosaccharides, oligosaccharides, disaccharides, monosaccharides, polyols; all types of carbohydrates. Because of their molecular structure they can be broken down in the small intestine very quickly. The excessive

fermentation that results can lead to discomfort and bloating. Stop eating the FODMAP foods and the symptoms subside.

Here's how carbohydrate digestion should happen: It starts in your mouth, where enzymes within saliva start to break down the relatively weak bonds of carbohydrate molecules. Your pancreas adds some more enzymes not long after the food leaves your stomach, so that by the time it arrives at your small intestine the food components are almost ready to be absorbed. (Some forms of carbohydrates, like undigestible fibre, aren't absorbed here but pass on towards the large intestine to be fermented there.)

Waiting on the surface of your small intestines are enzymes ready to complete the final breakdown. Now the smallest kind of carbohydrate molecule (a monosaccharide) is tiny enough to pass across the wall of your bowel into the bloodstream then head towards your liver for packaging and

despatch towards hungry cells. But if your bowel wall is damaged, irritated or inflamed this might not happen.

The transition from healthy gut to carbohydrate-intolerant can be gradual or sudden, but the sensitive bowel wall can easily be damaged.

Your small intestines look rather like a shag-pile carpet up close; sensitive cells that are replaced every few days are protected by a layer of mucous, on which enzymes and microflora (bacteria) reside. Here are some events which can contribute to a damaged bowel wall:

- Under relentless psychological stress that protective mucous layer thins, laying bare those sensitive cells that do the absorbing. Because the mucous layer has gone, the good bacteria and enzymes aren't there much either.

- A gastrointestinal infection or parasite infection has irritated and inflamed your bowel wall.
- A course of antibiotics has upset your usual bowel flora.

Because everyone is unique, the process for rehabilitating your gut is unique too. It isn't instant, and treatment is shaped around what caused your gut injury in the first place as well as rebuilding your bowel wall. But there's a wide range of nutrients, herbs and homoeopathic remedies ready to help.

THINK CATERPILLARS AND FIBRE TO AVOID CRAMPING

Surrounding your bowel wall are layers of smooth muscle. They contract in response to pressure in the lumen (the inside of your bowel) from food, and this is why a fibre-rich diet is important (fibre creates the bulk that makes your bowels move more easily). You've

seen a caterpillar move - your bowel wall moves in the same way, propelling food through towards your anus ready for the next evacuation.

If you don't eat enough fibre, there's nothing for the bowel muscle to 'push', so cramping pain can result. We all need 25-35g of fibre every day; from looking at many food diaries, most people eat 10-15g. If you already suffer from IBS, the type of fibre you choose is important as some forms of fibre are too 'scratchy'.

Stress can also cause the smooth muscle in your bowel wall to 'freeze', resulting in pain or constipation or both. Anxiety and nerves can also cause a problem, making your bowels contract too readily. That's why one of the important aspects of your treatment is stress management.

AVOID BLOWOUTS IN YOUR BOWEL MUSCLE (DIVERTICULITIS)

Sometimes too much pressure on those muscles in your bowel wall from straining to pass motions (like the hard stools of constipation) can result in 'blow outs' - little pockets of connective tissue that poke out from your bowel wall. These pockets can trap food particles and become infected, bringing on pain and fever. That's called diverticulitis.

Chronic diverticulitis can become a serious problem, as with each bout of infection the bowel wall becomes thinner, less able to cope, and you become more vulnerable to perforation of the bowel wall. The heavy duty antibiotics used to treat diverticulitis wipes out the good bacteria too, forcing you to constantly re-inoculate your gut with good bacteria or risk the bad bacteria taking over again. Life can turn into a constant nervous vigilance for symptoms – but this kind of stress isn't good for your bowels anyway!

The official name for these bowel blow-outs is 'diverticuli', and when infection occurs, its termed 'diverticulitis'. Although the pockets won't ever disappear, you can manage the condition. Depending on how severe your diverticuli are, and how frequently you experience infections, your naturopath will suggest a management plan that incorporates the right kinds of food and possibly supplements to keep your bowel in good order.

SUCCESSFUL TREATMENT OF IBS: WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

First, find out what's really happening in there. This takes time! Sometimes testing is needed, sometimes not. A range of functional pathology testing is easily available that involves just a simple stool sample. Your naturopath can arrange this, and will carefully explain the results to you. The

report will show how well your food is being digested, and whether there's an imbalance of bacteria, or if parasites are what's causing the problem. Once you know what's causing your IBS, your naturopath will develop a treatment plan to get your bowel health back on track.

It's hard to overstate just how important stress management is for your bowel health. You need to switch off your stress response regularly. Your naturopath will discuss this with you to find out what method is going to fit best with your lifestyle.

Herbs and nutrients are frequently used for clearing gut infections as they are so effective and have side effects only when they're killing off too many bad bugs at once' (Then we adjust the dosage of course so you don't feel any discomfort while your gut is being disinfected)

Probiotics are almost always used to 're-inoculate' your bowel with good bacteria. The

type of probiotic bacterial strain used varies depending on your situation.

Other natural remedies to calm inflammation, promote the regrowth of the protective mucous barrier, and reduce stress are often used. This may be herbs, nutrients, or homoeopathics.

Whatever caused your personal group of symptoms known as IBS or diverticulitis, your naturopath has a range of treatments available to help you feel much better again, soon!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olwen Anderson is a naturopath and counsellor located in Murwillumbah, NSW. Treating gut problems is a major



Olwen / **Anderson**
Naturopath | Counsellor
www.olwenanderson.com.au

part of her practice; and as a qualified counsellor Olwen is able to help you with the emotional side of managing dysfunctional bowels. Her web site, www.olwenanderson.com.au is packed full of educative information to help you get healthier. Because life is more fun when you feel good!

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