

IBS Awareness Month: Understanding Your Gut

by Carrie Eckersley (PCN Dietitian)



"I feel like my gut has a mind of its own"

This is something I hear regularly from patients.



One day digestion seems fairly normal, and the next day there is bloating, discomfort, wind, or an urgent rush to the toilet. Many people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) describe their symptoms as unpredictable and frustrating.

April is IBS Awareness Month, and it's a good opportunity to talk about a condition that affects many people but is often misunderstood.

IBS is a common condition that affects the digestive system. People with IBS may experience symptoms such as abdominal pain, bloating, wind, constipation, diarrhoea, or a mixture of both.

Although the symptoms can be very real and distressing, one reassuring thing to know is that IBS does not cause damage to the bowel.

Instead, the digestive system has usually become more sensitive and reactive than usual.

The Gut and the Brain Are Closely Connected

THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM HAS ITS OWN NETWORK OF NERVES, SOMETIMES CALLED THE GUT-BRAIN CONNECTION.

This system is constantly communicating with the brain and responding to things such as food, stress, sleep and daily routines.



When this system becomes more sensitive, the gut can react strongly to normal processes like digestion or gas moving through the bowel. This can lead to symptoms such as pain, bloating and changes in bowel habits.

This is one reason why IBS symptoms can sometimes flare up during periods of stress, illness, or changes in routine.

Understanding this connection can often help people feel more reassured about what is happening in their body.

When the Gut Becomes “On High Alert”



DID YOU KNOW?

Many people with IBS describe feeling like their gut reacts very quickly to food, stress, or even small changes in routine.

One way to think about IBS is that the digestive system has become a bit over-alert. The nerves in the gut become more sensitive, and the body can start reacting strongly to things that would normally pass unnoticed.

THIS IS WHY ...

Symptoms can sometimes feel unpredictable.

The good news is that the gut is very responsive to changes in routine, diet, stress levels and reassurance. When the body begins to feel more settled and less “on alert”, the digestive system often becomes calmer too.

DIET CAN HELP - BUT IT'S NOT THE WHOLE PICTURE



Many people with IBS focus on trying to find the one “trigger food” causing their symptoms.

While some foods can make symptoms worse, IBS is rarely caused by a single food. Symptoms are often influenced by several factors including digestion, gut sensitivity, stress, sleep and eating patterns.

For some people, dietary approaches such as reducing certain fermentable carbohydrates (known as FODMAPs) can help improve symptoms. However, these approaches are usually best used short-term and with guidance, as overly restrictive diets can sometimes make things harder in the long run.

Often the most helpful starting points are much simpler:

- *Eating regular meals.*
- *Avoiding long gaps between eating.*
- *Drinking enough fluids.*
- *Noticing patterns in symptoms rather than reacting to a single episode.*

Small changes to daily routines can often make a meaningful difference.

The Importance of Reassurance

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES WITH IBS IS THAT SYMPTOMS CAN FEEL WORRYING, EVEN THOUGH THE CONDITION ITSELF IS NOT HARMFUL.

People often worry that something more serious may be wrong, particularly when symptoms change or flare up unexpectedly.

Getting the right assessment and understanding how the gut works can help people feel more confident about managing their symptoms.



When the gut feels less "on alert", symptoms often become easier to manage.



When to Seek Advice...

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING ONGOING DIGESTIVE SYMPTOMS, IT'S ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA TO SPEAK WITH A HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL.



They can assess your symptoms, rule out other conditions if necessary, and help guide you towards the most appropriate support.



Supporting Your Gut Health

IBS can be frustrating, but many people find that symptoms improve once they understand how their gut responds to different factors.

With the right support and strategies, it is possible to find a pattern of eating and living that helps your gut feel calmer and more predictable.

