Assessing Risk as Well as Benefit in Treatments
William F. Norton, Vice President, International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD), Milwaukee, WI

The goal of taking a drug to treat an illness is to help us feel better. When we are ill and looking for relief, the benefit of a treatment is usually the focus. We hear about the benefits of treatments from advertising and we go to see doctors looking for benefits. But, what about the risk that comes with it? When considering a treatment, you will want to understand and consider risk as well as benefit.

Any medicine – prescription, over-the-counter (OTC), and herbal – can have risks as well as benefits. Benefits are the helpful effects that you get from a drug or other therapy. Risks are the chances that something unwanted or unexpected, an adverse event or side effect, could happen to you. A side effect could be a minor nuisance or a serious event. Sometimes a side effect is unavoidable to achieve a treatment’s benefit.

Understanding and managing risk is an important part of a long-term treatment plan. Taking an active role and working together with your physician gives the best chance for a positive outcome.

What You Can Do
As a patient, talk to your doctor about treatment risk as well as benefit. Here are some examples of questions to ask and things to consider:

- How severe is your own condition? What effect is it having on your life?
- What is the possible benefit from the drug being prescribed or suggested to you?
- In the context of your personal illness status, what are the chances that you will receive benefit from the treatment?
- How much benefit should you reasonably expect?
- What possible side effects might there be from the treatment?
- In the context of your personal health status, what are the chances that you will experience a side effect or serious adverse event from the treatment?
- What can you do to reduce the chances of side effects?
- How will you know when a side effect occurs?
- Exactly what should you do if a side effect occurs?

What to Expect from Your Healthcare Professional

People managing chronic illnesses do best medically when they work in partnership with their physicians. Good communication between you and your doctor is essential. Here are ways your doctor may help you assess risk and benefit of a treatment as you work to manage your condition.

- Help educate you to understand your disorder, including its natural progression, and treatment options
- Help you have reasonable ideas about the level of benefit your treatment may achieve, and the risk associated with the treatment
- Explain factors that affect both risk and benefit – like prior medical history, multiple medications, or lifestyle choices
- Explain your risks, including what they are and how to reduce them, how to recognize side effects or adverse events, and what to do when they occur

Gaining a Better Understanding
It is important to be knowledgeable about benefit and risk of a treatment. There are no cures for functional GI or motility disorders. While the search for improved treatment options continues, we must do our best to understand current therapies. An understanding that all medications have inherent risks helps to best be able to consider treatment options, seek to learn how to manage risk, and achieve positive results.

About IFFGD
The International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org or www.aboutIBS.org.

About the Publication
Opinions expressed are an author’s own and not necessarily those of the International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD). IFFGD does not guarantee or endorse any product in this publication or any claim made by an author and disclaims all liability relating thereto. This article is in no way intended to replace the knowledge or diagnosis of your doctor. We advise seeing a physician whenever a health problem arises requiring an expert’s care.

For more information, or permission to reprint this article, contact IFFGD by phone at 414-964-1799 or by email at iffgd@iffgd.org.