



## Are You a Gut Responder? Hints on Coping with an Irritable Bowel

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### Gut Brain Connection

The gut and the brain develop from the same part of the human embryo. So it is not surprising that the intestinal tract has such a rich nerve supply that it is sometimes referred to as “the little brain.” The gut shares many of the same kinds of nerve endings and chemical transmitters as the brain to which it remains linked through a large nucleus (the locus ceruleus). This collection of nerve cells is partly responsible for controlling anxiety and fear, which explains why these emotions can sometimes be associated with bowel function.

### Are You a Gut Responder?

The linkage between the brain and the body is easily demonstrated. When people are asked to imagine an anxiety provoking situation (such as taking a test, speaking in public, or disagreeing with the boss), everybody experiences both an emotional and a physical response. This is the nervous system’s way of gearing up to meet a challenge. Emotional feelings can include fear, anxiety, stress, apprehension, or doubt. The physical sensations may include muscle tension, sweating, palpitations, breathlessness, or abdominal cramps. Every individual differs in which emotions or sensations they experience and also in whether they are more aware of what is happening in their mind or their body. For some people, their “target organ” is the gut. This may be partly hereditary – irritable bowel does run in some families. Furthermore, certain individuals are more “symptom sensitive” than others; it is as if an amplifier were turned up so they are more tuned in to their bodies. Why this is so remains unclear. People vary in how much they communicate distress verbally or through body language. This may be partly learned.

In children abdominal pain is a very common response to worry, and it may be unintentionally reinforced by parental attention or avoidance of stressful situations, e.g., staying away from school. Another possibility is that people who are “symptom sensitive” may have been emotionally deprived or even physically abused as children and are consequently more tuned in and easily alarmed by their bodies as well as less able to express their emotions. Whatever the reason, anybody who is either a “gut responder” or “symptom sensitive,” or both, is at risk for experiencing irritable bowel symptoms under stressful circumstances.

### Irritable Bowel: Cause, Consequence or Coincidence?

Because the bowel and the brain are so closely linked, it is often difficult to separate cause from effect. Life’s daily hassles as well as more prolonged predicaments (a difficult job, a tense relationship) may provoke an irritable bowel. But, it is equally true that the symptoms this produces such as diarrhea, urgency, incontinence, or pain, are stressful themselves. This creates a “chicken and egg” situation in which it may be impossible to separate cause from effect. What complicates matters more is the fact that digestive and emotional disorders are both common. Irritable bowel, depression, panic, and anxiety each, by themselves, occur in at least one in ten people. Given this, it is hardly surprising that emotional symptoms and bowel dysfunction often occur together in the same person – irrespective of cause and effect.

If a person does suffer from an episode of depression, panic, or anxiety and happens to be a gut responder, they will almost certainly experience a worsening of irritable bowel symptoms while their emotional disorder persists.

## Everyday Living and Irritable Bowel

Living with an irritable bowel is not easy.

Unpredictable, painful or frequent bowel movements and fluid, smelly or constipated stools can disrupt everyday living, induce stigma, and create embarrassment. Loss of control, loss of dignity, altered body image, reduced physical activity, and dietary restrictions may all be problems to contend with. These can interfere with work and social functions in both obvious and subtle ways – including leisure and sexual activities.

Any or all of these considerable adjustment issues may create fatigue, depression, anxiety, or sleep disturbance. People who deal with tiredness by drinking coffee or cola, or with anxiety by consuming junk food, alcohol, or by smoking create still further insults to their already sensitive bowel.

## You and Your Doctor

Another difference that distinguishes people is the degree to which they worry about, or brood over, bodily sensations and their tendency to seek help from doctors. This can be influenced by fear of disease brought on either by personal experience or sickness in family members and friends. This heightened sense of vulnerability in some individuals may drive people to seek reassurance in repeated visits to doctors and requests for multiple tests or medications. The therapeutic or investigative zeal of some physicians may seduce a few individuals down a slippery slope into doctor shopping, dependency on drugs, invalidism, and the sick role. Irritable bowel symptoms may contribute to this because they are often chronic and intermittent, and their cause is uncertain. A doctor who understands your condition and one in whom you have confidence is obviously important.

## HINTS ON HOW TO COPE

- Learn to recognize your unique emotional and bodily responses to stress. Close your eyes and imagine a stressful situation. Are you symptom sensitive, or a gut responder?
  - Keep a daily diary for a month or two to help identify situations that provoke your stress response.
- If possible, try to avoid situations that provoke your stress response.
  - Learn new coping skills that lessen your vulnerability to stressful situations. This might involve assertiveness training to deal more effectively with people who intimidate you, learning new test taking strategies, or practicing public speaking. Most bookstores have self-help manuals to deal with these kinds of problems.
  - Train yourself to reduce gut responses through relaxation, breathing exercises, or meditation techniques. Again, self-help manuals are available.
  - Join a support group to problem solve and share solutions.
  - Find a caring physician. Other people with irritable bowel may help you find a physician familiar with this condition.
  - If you believe you have an emotional disorder (such as depression, panic, or anxiety) that may be making your irritable bowel worse, ask for help. Because of their shared chemistry, medications that calm the mind often soothe the bowel.
  - If you need help developing new coping techniques or a better understanding of your own gut-brain connections, ask your gastroenterologist to suggest a mental health professional who can help you. This might be a counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist, preferably one who knows about irritable bowel syndrome and who has a working relationship with your physician.

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