

- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) / Digestive system

Combining three healthy behaviours can lower IBS risk, study finds

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Combining three healthy behaviours can reduce the risk of irritable bowel syndrome by 42%, a study suggests.



IBS affects the digestive system and its symptoms include stomach cramps, bloating, diarrhoea and constipation. People can suffer for days, weeks or months at a time, and symptoms can come and go. IBS is thought to affect up to one in 10 people worldwide.

It is not known exactly what causes the condition but studies have suggested that oversensitive nerves in the gut, stress and a family history of IBS can play a role.

Previous research has linked individual lifestyle factors with a heightened risk of IBS, and researchers wanted to find out if a combination of several measures could ward off the condition.

The study, published in the journal *Gut*, found that leading a healthy lifestyle was strongly linked to a lower chance of developing the condition.

Five healthy behaviours – not smoking, good sleep, enough exercise, healthy diet and lower alcohol consumption – were all studied.

Three of these – not smoking, vigorous exercise and getting at least seven hours of sleep a night – appeared to have the biggest effect individually.

When looking at the healthy behaviours combined, people who had three or more of the five were the least likely to develop IBS.

Researchers looked at 64,286 people – with an average age of 55, and of whom just over half were women – from the UK Biobank medical database. None had a diagnosis of IBS at the start of the study period, and all had completed at least two 24-hour questionnaires on their diets.

Over 12 and a half years, 961 cases of IBS were noted (1.5% of the sample). Of all those in the study, 7,604 people (12%) did not have any of the five healthy lifestyle behaviours, 20,662 (32%) reported one, 21,901 (34%) reported two and 14,101 (22%) reported three to five.

After accounting for factors that could influence the results, such as a family history of IBS, people who were healthiest had the lowest risk of IBS.

Having one healthy behaviour was associated with a 21% lower risk, having two was associated with a 36% lower risk, and having three to five was linked to a 42% lower risk.

Individually, never smoking was linked to a 14% lower risk, a high level of physical activity was associated with a 17% lower risk, and a good night's sleep was linked to a 27% lower risk.

The researchers from the University of Hong Kong cautioned that they could not prove cause and effect due to the observational nature of the study.

The findings relied on self-reporting, which may not always be accurate, and the sample group was older, so the findings may not be applicable to younger age groups. Nor was it possible to account for any lifestyle changes over time during the monitoring period.

The researchers concluded: "Adhering to a higher number of the five healthy lifestyle behaviours is significantly associated with a lower IBS incidence in a middle-aged population. Our findings suggest the potential of lifestyle modifications as a primary prevention strategy for IBS."