- Lifestyles

Healthy lifestyle 'may lower risk of irritable bowel syndrome'

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Combining three healthy behaviours can reduce the risk of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) by 42%, a study has suggested.

IBS affects the digestive system. Its symptoms include stomach cramps, bloating, diarrhoea and constipation, and it 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.

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.

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. Over 12 and a half years, 961 cases of IBS were noted.

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.

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