

South City Journal

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

healthscope

IBS common condition; little talked about

By **JULIE RANDLE**
LIFESTYLE EDITOR

Have you ever consumed a food or beverage that didn't agree with you and as a result your body produced gas, diarrhea, constipation or abdominal pain? All of these unpleasant experiences can all be associated with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

"IBS is abdominal discomfort or pain associated with some alteration in the bowel — diarrhea or constipation — that is long lasting," said Dr. Chandra Prakash, an associate professor of medicine and a gastroenterologist at Washington University School of Medicine.

Though IBS is a common condition that affects nearly 20 percent of Americans, some people have difficult discussing the topic because they are embarrassed by the problem.

Because April is IBS Awareness Month, medical professionals are focusing on the disease.

Bill Downs, a medical nutrition researcher, who works out of an office in his home near Philadelphia, encourages people to talk about their issue, rather than suffer in silence.

Some people may have experienced a minor spell of IBS that didn't require a visit to the doctor's office, but not everyone is so lucky. About 25 percent of people with the condition have to seek medical help because the symptoms cause problems and discomfort.

What brings most people with IBS to a doctor is the abdominal pain, said Dr. Tara Talwar, a gastroenterologist at St. Anthony's Medical Center. Symptoms of the condition include abdominal pain,



DR. CHANDRA PRAKASH



DR. TARA TALWAR

bloating, mucus in the stool, diarrhea, constipation or alternating between both diarrhea and constipation.

It's not uncommon for Prakash to see patients that tell him they are having any number of these symptoms, but the diagnosis is difficult, he said. That's where his expertise as a gastroenterologist comes into play.

Prakash makes an IBS diagnosis based on the presentation of symptoms and warning signs.

However, because other colon conditions can have similar symptoms to IBS, sometimes other testing is needed to exclude other serious medical conditions.

The exact cause of IBS is unknown, but Prakash describes the condition the way he sees it. "It's abnormality in the brain/gut access. There are triggers are at both ends," he added. Gut triggers include inflammation or infections and brain triggers consist of stress, anxiety and depression.

Depending on a person's situation, how much the IBS interferes with their life and the degree of severity, determines how a doctor will treat each patient.

A variety of prescription medications can be used to help treat IBS, including antispasmodics, anti-diarrhea items and tricyclic antidepressants. These things may be used in combination with bulking agents, which help regulate bowel functions.

"We can do a lot for patients with IBS," Prakash said.

Diet also can be an important tool in managing IBS. Physicians don't put patients on a strict diet, but rather give them some general guidelines as to what might

IBS by the numbers

Healthcare experts say that irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) affects more women than men. Up to one in five American adults has IBS, according to MayoClinic.com.

Medical professionals provided some additional statistics on irritable bowel syndrome:

• **Women suffer three times more from the condition than men.**

• **IBS strikes about 20 percent of the U.S. population.**

• **Each year there are 3.5 million visits in the U.S. to doctors' offices for IBS.**

• **IBS accounts for more than one out of every 10 doctor visits.**

• **In the U.S. each year there are 2.2 million prescriptions written for IBS.**

• **People with IBS miss three times as many workdays as others.**

aggravate a patient's condition. Sometimes people have to experiment with different foods and learn what might trigger bad reactions.

Because people with IBS have a more sensitive colon than normal people, certain foods may trigger attacks, including dairy products, fruits, foods with Sorbitol, which is a sugar substitute, carbonated beverages, caffeine drinks and beans, doctors said.

In addition, IBS can be aggravated by foods that contain sulfur, such as broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower and beans.

Foods that are easier to digest can help prevent IBS. Those foods include fish, poultry, fruits, produce and whole grains.

"The harder they are to digest the more we develop an immune response to reject them when they come into the body," said Bill Downs, a medical nutrition researcher based in Philadelphia.

Keeping a good mental outlook can also help management of the disease.

"IBS is very common. There's no reason to be depressed about it. It can be managed medically with diet and medicine," Talwar said.

"The harder they are to digest the more we develop an immune response to reject them when they come into the body."

Bill Downs

Medical Nutrition Researcher