



Article Link: <http://www.webmd.com/ibs/alternative-therapies>

## Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) Health Center

### IBS and Alternative Therapies

Alternative treatments such as acupuncture, dietary supplements, and herbs don't always get the official scientific nod, but some patients turn to them for help with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

#### Acupuncture for IBS

Acupuncture is a popular alternative therapy. It's proven effective for treating chronic pain, according to researchers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). It is also widely used to treat IBS, but the studies are mixed on whether the treatments really work for this condition.

Some studies show that acupuncture helps with abdominal pain and other [IBS symptoms](#). Other studies show that it doesn't help.

Philip Schoenfeld, MD, MEd, MSc, investigated various IBS treatments when he co-authored the treatment guidelines published by the American College of Gastroenterology. He says the hard data showing acupuncture's effectiveness isn't very good. Yet "that does not mean that acupuncture might not be helpful," he says. Many individuals say they feel better after acupuncture. Out of all alternative options, he suspects that acupuncture may help some people with IBS.

It is not entirely clear how this traditional Chinese treatment works. Some researchers believe the acupuncture needles stimulate electromagnetic signals in the body. These signals are thought to either encourage the release of pain-killing chemicals, or nudge the body's natural healing systems into action.

Acupuncture is ideally used with other treatments, says Jeanine Blackman, MD, PhD, medical director of the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine. She says even in China, the therapy is never used on its own. Talk with your doctor if you are considering acupuncture.

#### Oils and Supplements for IBS

To help her IBS patients, Blackman recommends a combination of treatments, including [changes in diet](#), [stress reduction](#), and supplements such as evening primrose oil, borage oil, fish oil, or probiotics. She says the oil supplements help calm down the gut, and probiotics restore the good balance of bacteria in the digestive system.

Evening primrose oil comes from the seed of a small yellow wildflower, and borage oil comes from the seed of a common weed. Both supplements are similar in nature.

Some proponents say evening primrose oil can help improve IBS symptoms, especially in women who experience a worsening of pain, discomfort, and bloating during their menstrual period.

Claims about evening primrose oil are largely unproven, reports the University of California at Berkeley Wellness Guide to Dietary Supplements. Plus, side effects reportedly include stomach upset, headaches, and rashes.

Fish oil supplements have been examined along with fish for a number of benefits, including preventing heart disease and easing autoimmune disorders. There doesn't appear to be any scientific proof, however, that they work for IBS.

#### Probiotics for IBS

On the other hand, there's some evidence that taking probiotics help IBS sufferers. Probiotics are bacteria that naturally live in the gut. Some people believe that several intestinal disorders may arise when there isn't enough good bacteria in the gut.

One study discussed at the medical conference Digestive Disease Week 2003 found that probiotic treatment significantly improved IBS symptoms and quality of life. In the study, researchers primarily used the bacteria *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Bifidobacteria infantis*. People with IBS reported fewer symptoms and, in general, a higher quality of life after taking the probiotics for four weeks.

Just as significant, the probiotic therapy did not appear to cause side effects, according to the study's author, Stephen M. Faber, MD, from Albemarle Gastroenterology Associates, PC, in Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

"These are organisms that are supposed to be in the gut. The body knows how to control them," Farber told Medscape, WebMD's web site for health professionals, at the medical conference.

### Herbs for IBS

Herbs are also popular options for people with IBS. Peppermint is used to calm muscles in the colon, which may cause some of the diarrhea and abdominal discomfort suffered by people with IBS. Studies have been mixed with this herb. The Mayo Clinic advises anyone who'd like to try it to get the enteric-coated capsules, and to be aware that it may make heartburn worse.

Registered herbalists never use peppermint on its own, nor do they recommend it for an extended period of time, says Jonathan Gilbert, who has a diplomate in herbology and acupuncture from the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). He is a senior consultant for traditional oriental medicine at the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland.

For people who are interested in true herbal therapy, Gilbert recommends a visit to an herbalist who has comprehensive training and is certified by the NCCAOM.

"In order to get a solution to a complex disorder, you need a complex formula, and in order to get that, you need to see someone who can actually prepare it," says Gilbert, noting he could combine up to 30 to 40 herbs for one formula. He says classic Chinese medicine has thousands of preset formulas for different ailments.

A lot of these formulas can't be bought on store shelves, adds Gilbert.

If you are interested in herbal therapy, dietary supplements, acupuncture, or any other treatment for your IBS, make sure you talk with your doctor. Herbs may interact with other medications you may be taking. Dietary supplements may become toxic if not used properly. Your doctor can also advise you on [medicines for IBS with constipation](#) and [IBS with diarrhea](#).

#### WebMD Medical Reference

SOURCE: Philip Schoenfeld, MD, MEd, MSc, co-author of American College of Gastroenterology's "Evidence-Based Position Statement on the Management of Irritable Bowel Syndrome in North America." Jeanine Blackman, MD, PhD, medical director of the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine. Jonathan Gilbert, who has a diplomate in herbology and acupuncture from the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (NCCAOM). The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine Web site: "Acupuncture." Mayo Clinic Web site: "Irritable Bowel Syndrome." WebMD Feature: "Natural Alternatives for IBS." About.com: "Herbs and Supplements for IBS." University of California at Berkeley Wellness Letter Web site. Medscape: "Probiotics Significantly Reduce Symptoms of IBS, Ulcerative Colitis," and "Highlights from Digestive Disease Week: An Expert Interview with Lawrence R. Schiller, MD."

Reviewed by [Charlotte E. Grayson Mathis, MD](#) on May 01, 2004

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