Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Problem description

Pain in the lower abdomen, changes in bowel habits with frequent, urgent diarrhea or constipation, bloating, and cramping are all symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). It is a disorder of the lower 'gut' or gastrointestinal (GI) tract that is thought to occur because of disruptions in communication between the brain and the gut. Research suggests that people with IBS experience abnormal gut motility (an altered rate of contraction of the gut muscles) and enhanced visceral sensitivity (an increased awareness in the brain of normal gut activity as well as painful distensions in the gut).

Services available

- Initial assessment for appropriateness of a behavioral treatment approach for IBS.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy program for irritable bowel syndrome, in small class format (10 to 15 individuals); involves eight 90-minute weekly sessions, held over nine weeks.

Description of services and treatment

Research has shown that psychological treatments are effective in providing relief of IBS symptoms as well as in reducing the distress and coping difficulties that often occur when dealing with a chronic illness. These strategies focus on ways to decrease stress and cope differently so that the stress doesn't 'go to the gut'. Cognitive behavioral therapy incorporates a number of steps aimed at changing behavior to improve health and coping. The approach includes daily symptom monitoring, educational information about IBS to ensure a better understanding of the illness, relaxation training, as well as training in techniques to change thought patterns by challenging automatic and distressing thoughts that can lead to gut reactions.

Key Provider(s)

Dr. Lesley Graff, C. Psych.

Sites

Health Sciences Centre Department
Phone : 204-787-7424

Availability

IBS program, involving 8 weekly sessions in small class format, typically offered in the fall, winter, and spring.
Referral process

Referral from family physician or gastroenterologist; requires confirmed diagnosis of irritable bowel syndrome.

Link to other resources

Canadian Psychological Association fact sheets on effectiveness of psychological treatments:
Irritable Bowel Syndrome