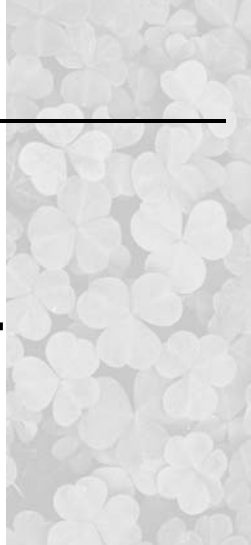

Understanding Irritable Bowel Syndrome



SIMON DARNLEY AND BARBARA MILLAR



Understanding Irritable Bowel Syndrome

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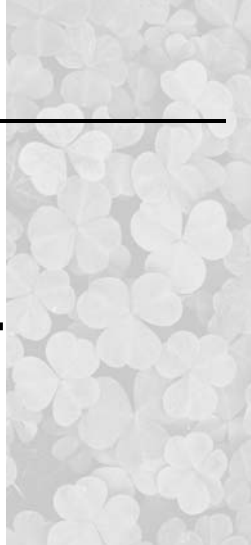
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About the authors

SIMON DARNLEY originally qualified as a psychiatric nurse before training as a cognitive behavioural therapist. He has over 15 years experience and was tutor for the nurse cognitive behavioural training at the Institute of Psychiatry for over 6 years before coordinating and supervising a large research trial in IBS. He has developed a psychological approach to IBS that has been effective for many people. He is also a part-time magician and father of two and would like it known that while writing the book he developed many of the symptoms of IBS.

BARBARA MILLAR is a freelance journalist who has specialised in health and health services for 16 years. She has worked regularly for the *Health Service Journal*, *Nursing Times*, *Therapy Weekly* and *Health Development Today* (the magazine of the Health Development Agency), as well as writing articles for the *Times Educational Supplement*, the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *New Statesman* and *Society*. She is also a qualified Blue Badge tour guide for Scotland.

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What is irritable bowel syndrome?

1

There is no simple test for irritable bowel syndrome. This chapter focuses on the symptoms that can lead to irritable bowel syndrome being diagnosed.

I am at a party making polite conversation with someone I've never met before; they ask what I do and I tell them I work in the field of IBS. Once the inevitable jokes are out of the way, I guarantee that they will either have it themselves or know someone who does. I've started to tell people I'm a train driver.

Here is Joanna's story. It's typical of the people I meet and treat with irritable bowel syndrome.

“Well I think it really started when I got ‘Montezuma’s revenge’ on holiday in the Canary Islands about 6 years ago.

I was only 19 and it was my first real holiday without the parents. After that my bowel movements have never really returned to normal, I mean they are always fairly loose and runny, if you know what I mean!

But the thing I hate most is the bloating, I think I retain water really easily. Since then it comes and goes but I think overall it's getting worse.

It's embarrassing and often gets me down.

I did go to my doctor about 2 years ago and she did various blood tests but they could not find anything.

Lucy (a close friend) told me it might be a food allergy and so I cut out all wheat for a while but apart from losing a couple of pounds ... it didn't seem to help that much with the bloating or going to the toilet.”

Joanna's story highlights many of the key features that make up irritable bowel syndrome (we will call it IBS from now on).

If you were to ask 100 specialists from 10 countries for a definition of IBS (say for the television programme *Family Fortunes*) you would find significant differences between them. Ask them again 10 years later and, as well as the differences between them, many answers will have changed. This is because we

are still learning exactly what IBS is and how best to identify it. At present it is a condition identified by the symptoms. These symptoms include pain, bloating or discomfort in the abdomen and a mixture of diarrhoea and constipation. In IBS people will experience these symptoms but we have yet to find any disease or abnormality in the body to explain it.

We know IBS is very common. In industrialised countries it affects around one in six of us. That's about a dozen people in every street!

IBS will affect people in vastly different ways. Some people will only occasionally experience symptoms, while for others the pain, diarrhoea and constipation are so severe that it becomes distressing, and affects many areas of life. It is not life-threatening, but there are times it can feel like it!

What are the signs and symptoms of IBS?

Box 1. The four main symptoms of IBS.

1. Abdominal pains: stomach pains.
2. Bloating: stomach swelling or a feeling that your stomach is bloated.
3. Diarrhoea.
4. Constipation.

There are four main symptoms of IBS, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, constipation and bloating. Other symptoms frequently found include mucus stools, increased wind, nausea and belching.

These symptoms can vary in frequency and intensity from person to person and within an individual person from day-to-day, and from month to month. Not knowing what will happen tomorrow is part of the frustrating nature of IBS:

“One day it's diarrhoea and the next I can't go at all, it's the stomach pain that's the worse thing.”

“I can go to the loo up to 40 times in one day, the next day I may not go at all, it can really get me down.”

“When I wake up I think, 'Will I have a fat day or a thin day?'”

Let's look at the symptoms in more detail.