

IRRITABLE BOWEL AND IRRITABLE BLADDER... WHY ARE OUR BODIES SO IRRITABLE???

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Irritable bowel Syndrome (IBS) is a very common illness in which a person's digestive system "acts up", leading to abdominal pain, bloating, constipation and diarrhea. Patients with IBS often undergo extensive work up, including colonoscopy, in order to get to the bottom of the frustrating symptoms, only to find out that the tests are all normal. Medications and dietary changes may work to curb the symptoms but are far from a cure for this awful condition.

A lesser known illness involves urinary symptoms, and is called painful bladder syndrome (PBS) or irritable bladder syndrome. In the past, this was known as interstitial cystitis. Patients with PBS have pain resembling a UTI, yet when cultured, there is no bacteria in the urine. The bladder may twitch, giving a sensation that one has to run to the bathroom all the time. Urine filling the bladder may cause severe pain. Like IBS, medications can help curb symptoms of PBS but do not cure this painful condition.

What is the source of these illnesses and why can't anyone figure out how to get rid of them? What is making our bodies so irritable?!

The short answer to this complex question is the following:

The *nervous system* is the culprit in causing these illnesses, not the bladder or the bowel itself.

In IBS and PBS, our internal organs (the bowel or the bladder) are supplied by nerves (peripheral nervous system) which are overly sensitive, a process called *peripheral sensitization*. This explains why a small amount of gas in the intestine, or urine in the bladder, which should not be painful, can lead to severe pain. Additionally, the brain (central nervous system) is overly sensitive to the message that the nerve is bringing in, a process known as *central sensitization*. The nerves, in turn are "irritable", causing twitching of the bladder or bowel wall which leads to the sensation of needing to go to the bathroom.

A high tech executive with severe abdominal cramping and diarrhea before every presentation is having a physical manifestation of her internal tension. Those messages from the brain that are normally used to alert the woman that she had some bad tuna, have been "hijacked", triggered from deep within her brain.

Similarly, the young overwhelmed mother who develops polyuria (frequent urination) and dysuria (painful urination), is suffering from the way her nervous system is affecting the bladder



wall. Those sensations which are usually reserved for an infection are being "hijacked" to respond to some type of internal stressor.

Scientists do not yet understand how the brain causes the nerves to become sensitized. Fortunately though, we can treat the irritable nerves, even if we don't know why they became irritable in the first place.

The treatment approach involves using the prefrontal cortex (the mature part of the brain, responsible for planning and decision making) to rewire the brain (a process called *neuroplasticity*). Since the *brain* is the cause of our irritable nerves, the *brain* can be utilized to settle them down.

How is this done? There are several cognitive "tricks" we can play on our brains. Here is one. For those interested, more information can be found on an excellent website by Dr. Howard Schubiner, "www.unlearnyourpain.com".

Just say "NO!"

This tactic involves forcefully, loudly (even if you are merely loud in your head), emphatically responding to symptoms by saying "NO!" Tell your twitchy nerves to "CUT IT OUT!" You don't need their warped messages - they are not helpful.

As juvenile as it sounds, this actually works. Every time you say "NO!" to the pain, refusing to be upset or aggravated by it, you strengthen a new nerve pathway in the brain which bypasses the existing pathway between the brain and the stomach/ bladder. Over time, the brain "gets the message" and stops "hijacking" the nervous system to cause physical symptoms.

Rewiring the brain takes time and patience. This is not a quick fix and may take many weeks to months before you notice improvement. As in other mind-body conditions (for example, tension headaches or fibromyalgia), cognitive techniques practiced consistently over time have been shown to alleviate and even eliminate symptoms completely. This novel approach gives hope to people who are suffering from illnesses for which modern medicine has little to offer. Patients can become empowered to help themselves, using the human mind, an incredibly powerful therapeutic tool.

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