Yoga Therapy for Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Ananda Seva Yoga Therapy

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INTRODUCTION

Gastrointestinal disorders are very prevalent in our Western society and there are many people afflicted with digestive problems and issues. I became interested in IBS when I was diagnosed with a mild case of it about ten years ago when I was suffering from severe stomach pain. At the time, I was also diagnosed with an ulcer. At the time, I was also obese and my dietary habits were poor. I did not exercise. I was a single mother with a young daughter and worked two jobs. There was a lot of stress in my life.

The ulcer and IBS was a wake up call for me to change my lifestyle. Over a period of time, I lost 100 pounds and started exercising regularly. I also became a yoga practitioner. This led me to teaching and into Yoga Therapy. While I sometimes have mild symptoms flair up that could relate to IBS, I am convinced that it was my lifestyle change that helped me regain my digestive health.

While I still struggle with an eating disorder and using food to deal with stress, I continue to educate myself on the best lifestyle to lead and I am convinced it is the yogic lifestyle that can alleviate syndromes and illnesses that are more symptomatic of our society than anything else. My research paper begins with an analysis of the approach of Western medicine for the diagnosis and treatment of IBS. After the Western analysis, the use Ayurvedic practices and yogic lifestyle is analyzed in order to help a yoga therapy patient who suffers from IBS symptoms to help restore health and alleviate digestive problems.

WESTERN MEDICINE and IBS

DESCRIPTION of SYNDROME

According to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, (NDDIC), Irritable Bowel Syndrome, (IBS), is a disorder characterized by cramping, abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, and diarrhea. As the name indicates, it is a syndrome, a combination of symptoms and signs. Although the symptoms can cause a great deal of discomfort, IBS does not normally lead to serious disease, such as cancer. With diet, stress management, and medications, it can be controlled. Without treatment or lifestyle changes, it can be disabling socially and may make work situations difficult. It is predominant in women over men, and begins normally prior to the age of 35. IBS is prevalent in and affects approximately 20% of the population with mild to severe symptoms.

There is not a specific cause that is associated with the onset of IBS symptoms, but there are many theories. The difficulty in associating cause to the symptoms is that the symptoms themselves are often conflicting. For example, both constipation and diarrhea are symptoms.

One theory is that the large intestine is reactive to certain foods. So, often diagnosis will include tests for food allergies, which will be discussed later. Another theory is that it is stress related and that stress can escalate the severity of the symptoms. The immune system, which fights infection, may also be involved.
For some people who suffer from IBS, the lining of the colon, called the epithelium, which is affected by the immune and nervous systems, regulates the flow of fluids in and out of the colon appears to work properly. However, when the contents in the colon move too quickly the colon loses its ability to absorb fluids, resulting in too much stool fluid. For other people, the movement slows down causing extra fluid to be absorbed, resulting in constipation.

In some cases, mild celiac symptoms are similar to IBS symptoms. People with celiac disease can not digest gluten, a substance found in wheat, rye and barley. If there is intolerance to gluten a gluten free diet is recommended. If symptoms do not cease, then further analysis of symptoms will be necessary.

Some researchers have reported that the cause may be related to a bacterial infection in the gastrointestinal tract. People who have had gastroenteritis sometimes develop IBS.

There is no specific test to diagnose IBS. A complete physical, with medical history and follow up examinations that may include stool testing, blood tests, and x rays. A colonoscopy may be performed.

Research included accessing the Mayo Clinic web site. Most the data there is similar as far as symptoms and description of the syndrome.

**SIGNS and SYMPTOMS**

Both sites give similar descriptions of symptoms. As they are general in nature, NDDIC indicates a diagnosis of IBS will result if there is discomfort for at least 12 weeks out of the previous year, not necessarily simultaneously. The following are general symptoms of IBS:

- Abdominal pain or cramping
- A bloated feeling
- Gas (flatulence)
• Diarrhea or constipation — sometimes alternating bouts of constipation and diarrhea
• Mucus in the stool

As these symptoms can vary in severity, it is best to consult with a doctor, as any one symptom, on its own, can also be symptomatic of more aggressive internal disease.

CAUSES

The cause of IBS is not known. As it is a syndrome, not a specified disease, not all of the symptoms are necessarily prevalent at the same time. For example, in one person the diarrhea can be the prevalent symptom, while in another person constipation is the prevalent symptom. Some of the possible causes are:

• Foods. Certain foods may aggravate the symptoms and the food may be different for different people. Oftentimes, it is necessary to test for food allergies.
• Stress. Symptoms can be very aggravated during periods of stress.
• Other illnesses. For example, episodes of infectious diarrhea (gastroenteritis) can trigger IBS.

TESTS and DIAGNOSIS

As stated above, since IBS is a syndrome with many possible symptoms, one criterion, called the “Rome” criteria for all gastrointestinal disorders, is that there are 12 weeks in a 12 month period of the symptoms. You need to have at least two of the following symptoms:

• A change in consistency or frequency of stool.
• Straining, urgency, or feeling you can't completely empty the bowel.
• Mucus.
• Abdominal distension.

Other symptoms may cause your doctor to order some more extensive testing, if you are late onset of symptoms after the age of 50, have weight loss, fever, or recurring vomiting. Some of the testing ordered may include:

• Flexible sigmoidoscopy – Examination of the lower part of colon.(Sigmoid)
• Colonoscopy – Tube used to examine entire length of colon.
• Computerized tomography (CT) scan – This x ray of internal organs help doctor rule out other potential diseases.
• Lactose intolerance tests – Lactase is an enzyme necessary to digest sugar in dairy products. If not produced you will have symptoms similar to IBS.
• Blood tests – Celiac disease is sensitivity to wheat protein that cause signs similar to IBS. Blood tests can rule this out.
TREATMENT and DRUGS

Treatment focuses on the alleviation of symptoms and the discomfort of IBS. Treatment may include:

- Fiber supplements for irregularity.
- Anti-diarrheal medications such as Imodium (loperamide).
- Eliminating high gas foods such as carbonated beverages, raw fruits, salads, cauliflower, broccoli.
- Anticholinergic medications to alleviate painful spasming of the bowel.
- Antidepressant medications to alleviate depression as well as inhibit neurons that control the intestines.
- Counseling if there is persistent depression.

PREVENTION

Although there is no sure way to prevent an onset of symptoms, there are preventative measures such as eating healthy, exercising, getting enough sleep, and using relaxation techniques such as meditation and breathing to keep stress levels low. Alternative remedies are suggested such as yoga and massage. These preventative measures in Western medicine are general and not specific in nature.

There are no specific nutrition guidelines for IBS. Generally patients may be told to incorporate more fiber in the diet, yet at the same time, they may be told to be careful of highly fibrous foods that may aggravate digestive gas. Usually they are told to consult a nutritionist for further advice.

Some other alternative measures may include acupuncture, the use of herbs, and biofeedback. There are many support groups online for people who struggle to manage their IBS.

A FULL YOGA THERAPY and AYURVEDIC APPROACH TO IBS

AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE and YOGA CIKITSA (THERAPY)

In the Ayurvedic system of health, IBS is not recognized as a group of symptoms with a drug or treatment to match the symptom. Different types of people may have IBS symptoms for very different reasons so the treatment is based on an individual assessment of the tridosha, or natural constitution, of the patient involved and an analysis is made to determine if their natural constitution is out of balance and where the imbalance resides in the tridosha.

In Yoga and Ayurveda, the universe manifests in three biological properties. The first property, Vata, expresses itself as movement in which the elements of air and space are dominant. The second property, Pitta, is the transformative property in which the elements of fire and water preside in. The third property, Kapha, is preservation nourished through the elements of water and earth.
Every person’s natural constitution is determined at birth and is normally dominated by one or two of the doshas, Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. This natural balance of the three doshas is known as prakrti. The first requirement for healing is knowledge of the individual constitution and then to determine where the imbalance lies. The Ayurvedic practitioner and yoga therapist has many tools at their disposal, such as the pulse of the wrist or the examination of coloration of the tongue, but oftentimes the symptoms may tell where the imbalance lies and which of the doshas are out of balance. After making an assessment the person’s vikriti is determined. This is their current ratio of tridosha. Comparing this ratio to the prakrti will help the therapist to determine the dosha imbalance. After determining the dosha imbalances, a prescription for healing may be determined.

As stated at the beginning of this section, the treatment for the same syndrome, illness, or injury may be different for people with different constitutions. For example, in the case of this study IBS, a person may be exhibiting stronger Kapha tendencies than normal, showing Kapha out of balance for this particular person. If it is determined that the person is sleeping a little too much, not exercising, and not eating a healthy sattvic diet, they may be suffering from constipation and too much gas, which are indicative of IBS symptoms. On the other hand, another person may be overactive, dealing with a lot of stress, and eating foods that are absorbing so quickly they are suffering from diarrhea, exhibiting an excess of Pitta. The diagnosis for the same syndrome in two different people in Ayurveda and yoga cikitsa will result in different treatments. Also, both of these symptoms relate to Vata, which relates to the movement of stool through the lower body and the excretion of stool so consideration of Vata imbalance is crucial.

In both Ayurveda and yoga cikitsa, proper digestion is often the focus for illness. Agni is the internal fire that stokes our metabolism and ama is the buildup of toxic matter left in our body by undigested or improperly digested food. Pitta is the dosha normally associated with digestive issues. Each dosha is seated in a specific spot in the body and Pitta is seated in the intestinal mid section. Each of the doshas has subtypes and the subtype of Pitta that is related to the absorption of nutrients manifests as the digestive fire of agni and is called pachaka.

Based on the determination that IBS is a result of an imbalance of Pitta, a full yoga program may be prescribed based on the knowledge of Ayurveda prescriptives.

Since the symptoms also relate to movement in the lower intestines, there are some Vata imbalance issues referred to above which can relate to flair ups of constipation and diarrhea. As indicated in the Western approaches, this would relate to the flow of fluids, which will be too fast during onset of diarrhea and too slow during constipation.

**NUTRITION**

Since improper digestion may be one of the major causes for some of the intestinal symptoms of IBS, it would seem that Western medicine and research into the causes and treatment of IBS would include strong use of nutrition analysis the treatment of IBS and in the prevention of digestive illnesses. That is seldom the case.
Diagnosis very rarely includes a history of the patient’s eating habits. This is not the case in Ayurveda. In both yoga cikistsa and Ayurveda, strong recommendations will be made for dietary changes and a thorough analysis of the patient’s current and past nutritional habits would be undertaken by the practitioner or therapist.

A sattvic diet is strongly recommended for all constitutions. A sattvic diet consists mainly of fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, and whole grains, preferably organic. Two or three meals are suggested every day, with lunch being the larger meal with plenty of vegetable proteins and some dairy. No meal should be taken unless the previous is fully digested to lessen the buildup of ama in the intestines. It is important that the meals are cooked in a pleasant environment where there is lightness of spirit and joy.

If the Pitta is determined to be too high, more specific nutritional advice may be necessary. This may include an increase of fiber in the form of flax seed. It may also include the elimination of spicy, fiery foods. Also it may be necessary to avoid difficult to digest foods such as gluten or dairy especially if it has been determined that the symptoms are related to a lactose or gluten allergy. Enzymes may be taken to aid in digestion and yogurt will help replenish bacterial flora that also aids digestion. Alcohol and caffeine should be avoided as they are rajasic and lead to overstimulation. Tamasic foods, which are processed foods and contain little life force, or sattva, should also be avoided as they lead to dullness.

Although a sattvic diet is preferably vegetarian, some light chicken or fish protein may be recommended for Vata imbalance.

**ASANA**

Asanas to balance Pitta are suggested. They can be strong and can be used to induce a mild perspiration. Inversions cool the brain and can calm Pitta so headstands and shoulder stand can be both cooling and calming. Vinyasa sequences should emphasize feelings of openness and spaciousness to the midriff between the pelvis and the ribcage. Backward bending should be with mild to moderate intensity in order to not aggravate or displace Pitta. The spacing in vinyasa can be quick. The goal is to connect with the energy of enthusiasm and heat, balancing it to purify the physical body.

Surya namaskar, sun salutations are a great warm up for pitta. It is meditative in the focus of moving with the Ujjaye breathing during the motions so is calming to the mild to help alleviate stress. It can stand alone as a practice since it strengthens and stretches the muscles on the front and back of the body or can be used as a warm-up. A cobra vinyasa with cobra variations and counter posing in child’s pose and down dog can help open the area below the rib cage as well as strengthen the spine.

Along with regular asana practice, other light exercise such as walking 15 minutes after every meal to induce a healthy metabolism can be added.
Each internal organ relates directly to a chakra, or energy center, which is crucial for the release of kundalini energy. The intestines relate to manipura chakra and there are specific asanas that can strengthen manipura. They are as follows:

- Dhanurasana (Bow pose)
- Karmasana (Action pose)
- Mayurasana (Peacock pose)
- Shalabhasana (Locust pose)
- Cakrasana (Wheel pose)
- Bhujangasana (Cobra pose)
- Yoga Mudra
- Durga Pranam

**PRANAYAMA**

Two types of pranayama would be beneficial to cool the Pitta fire:

Sitali breathing is a cooling breath. With the use of belly breathing, the inhalation is taken into the mouth, which cools the evaporation and draws moisture inward. There is a five second breath retention with the mouth in a normal closed position and exhalation through the nose. The inhalation is done in a variety of ways. One is with the outer edges of the tongue pulled in to make a pipe type of passageway with the tongue. If this is not possible for the practitioner, the upper and lower incisors can be placed together with the lips pulled back into a smile. This allows the practitioner to control the amount of air inhaled. The practitioner may begin with ten rounds and work up by five rounds a week for a total of 40.

Agnasar dhouti specifically increases pachaka pitta and agni which will improve digestion. It also massages the intestines and makes them stronger. The best way to learn is to start in a standing position. The feet should be spread slightly wider than hip distance and the knees are bent. Hands are placed just above the knees with straight elbows. The head is tilted downward with the eyes open to watch the abdominal motions. It begins by inhaling, relaxing the abdomen letting its contour fall forward with gravity, and then exhale pulling the central abdominal region backward. Then there is repeated slow abdominal breathing three times, then inhale deeply and while exhaling lower the head until the chin is close to the chest in Jalandhara Bandha. While restraining the breath, the navel is pulled back and then relaxed to its normal position. The pull is repeated and the relaxation of the central abdomen as many times as possible without breathing. When the breath starts there should be three full breaths allowing the abdomen to move in harmony with the breathing. This would be one round. One should do three rounds, working up to 90 pumps for each round.

**RELAXATION AND MEDITATION**

In both Western medicine and Ayurveda, stress is both seen as a symptom of and a cause of many syndromes and illnesses. In our Western society we lead very busy lives which lead to imbalance which can cause stress.
Stress is a symptom of IBS and can aggravate IBS. Western approaches include the pursuit of techniques to learn to relax.

The practice of asana and pranayama in classic yoga is a precept to a meditation practice. The sutras of Patanjali state that the purpose of yoga is to alleviate the fluctuations of the mind. The practice of meditation is the final and yet maybe most important practice in the treatment and prevention of illness and very beneficial to those with IBS.

There are many methods of meditation and there is no right or wrong way. Some people do well with tapes to listen to as a guided meditation while some may seek spiritual guidance in mantra meditation. Like asana it is a practice and one needs to be patient to learn a method which allows of them to find a true place of inner peace where they are able to connect to the essence of their true natures and feel the power of internal peace and stillness.

**CONCLUSION**

As I researched this paper, I found message boards with people who struggle with severe IBS symptoms. A lot of them are frustrated that Western medicine has fallen short in helping them deal with their symptoms beyond prescription drugs which provide no long term solutions to their health issues. In addition, while Western medicine has come up with a long list of drugs to help alleviate some symptoms, it has done little with research into finding specific ways of giving them the tools they need to lead healthier lifestyles that could possibly cure some of these symptoms. There have been and are many clinical trials for drugs, but little research into nutrition. Western medicine is vague on nutrition and usually just recommends that patients see a nutritionist. Most patients are told that their IBS is not related to their lifelong eating habits while few questions are asked about eating habits or lifestyles that may have lead to these symptoms.

It is difficult to lead a balanced lifestyle in a society where processed and unhealthy foods are prevalent. Relying on the advice of Western health practitioners narrows the path to true health, which can be improved with a total mind, body, spirit connection. Ayurveda and yoga cikitsa therapies do not separate these three aspects of the human condition and do not focus treatment on any one exclusively. Many of the syndromes and illnesses that are increasing in our culture are related to lifestyles, environment and nutrition. While no one can lead a perfect lifestyle in the pursuit of health, sometimes making a few changes and incorporating them into our daily routine can improve our quality of life exponentially. I truly believe working towards a yogic lifestyle and being engaged in your own health can improve your life and if people were more pro active in doing so, we would see the rate of IBS decrease rather than increase.
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