

## Conscious Breathing

1. *Make yourself comfortable, its fine to lie down, sit or even stand.*
2. *Focus on your breathing taking steady even breaths. Count to 4 as you inhale and then exhale slowly to a count of six.*
3. *Close your eyes, focus on relaxing your muscles. Feel your shoulders drop and the tension leave your body.*
4. *Continue to focus on your breathing until you feel completely relaxed.*
5. *After a few minutes open your eyes.*

If you are experiencing feelings that are difficult to cope with, that are not going away, you may need some extra support. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and discuss them with your doctor. A psychologist or a counsellor can help you find ways to cope if you are feeling tressed, low, anxious or depressed.



### Ireland

Irish Society for Crohn's and Colitis (ISCC)  
Carmichael Centre,  
North Brunswick St.  
Dublin 7  
T: 01 8725737  
[www.iscc.ie](http://www.iscc.ie)

### UK

Crohn's and Colitis UK  
4 Beaumont House,  
Sutton Road,  
St Albans,  
Herts AL1 5HH, UK  
T: 0044 172 7830038  
[www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/contact](http://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/contact)

Publication of this booklet was made possible through an educational grant by Tillotts Pharma Limited. Further copies may be obtained from Tillotts Pharma Limited, 25 Sandyford Office Park, Dublin 18, Ireland. T: 01 - 2942015 Registered names, illustrations, trademarks, etc. used in this leaflet, even when not marked as such, are not to be considered unprotected by law.



# STRESS MANAGEMENT IN IBD



Kathleen Sugrue

Registered Advanced Nurse Practitioner (Inflammatory Bowel Disease)  
Mercy University Hospital, Cork

# What is IBD?

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) disease is a chronic, inflammatory condition of the gastrointestinal tract that is characterized by periods of relapse and remission. It is an umbrella term that encompasses ulcerative colitis (UC) and Crohn's disease (CD). While ulcerative colitis affects the large intestine and rectum, Crohn's disease can affect any part of the GI tract from the mouth to the anus. IBD is a life long illness that does not have a cure, treatment is aimed at inducing and maintaining remission.

## What is stress?

Psychological stress occurs when you have more mental or emotional pressure than you feel you can deal with. Everyone feels stress from time to time, having a long term illness such as IBD is challenging and you may be worried about aspects of your illness and treatment. You may also have concerns about the future and the possible impact of your illness on all areas of your life, family, relationships and work. Having made the distinction that stress does not cause IBD, it is important to recognize the role of stress in IBD. Having any chronic illness brings a significant amount of stress and pressure. No one is happy when they don't feel well, and in the case of chronic illness, people may not feel well much of the time. This stress may manifest itself in a variety of ways such as irritability, depression, or panic attacks. IBD itself is causing stress, and in turn, the stress causes the psychological problems. The psychological problems then exacerbate the IBD, creating a vicious circle. The stress did not cause the IBD. It is, however, going to make IBD worse. Symptoms of stress can include: headache, fatigue and muscle tension/pain. It can lead to feelings of anxiety, irritability, sadness and anger.

## Does stress have an impact on IBD?

Many patients feel that stress contributes to disease activity, severity as well as the symptom burden of IBD. It is common to have increased symptoms and flare up's during periods of stress in your life. When someone is under stress, the body gears up for a fight-or-flight response by secreting certain hormones, including adrenalin, as well as molecules called cytokines. They stimulate the immune system, which triggers inflammation. In people whose IBD is in remission, this sets the stage for the return of their symptoms, known as a flare-up. It isn't only major life events, such as losing a job or going through a divorce, that can make people more vulnerable to flare-ups; living with IBD also takes a toll. For instance, for most people, going out to eat or visiting a friend's house is a pleasurable activity. But for those with IBD, the need to learn ahead of time where the bathrooms are located, or the fear of not reaching one in time, can turn simple pleasures into anxiety-filled events. Stress management may help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety.

## What is Stress Management?

Managing stress is different for each person. You can't completely eliminate stress-producing events, but it may be possible to change your reaction to them. Examples of stress management include:

- *Listening to relaxing music*
- *Taking a walk somewhere peaceful*
- *Meditation or lying down in a dark room for a few minutes*
- *Talking to a friend or therapist*
- *Having a long bath*
- *Reading*
- *Biofeedback*
- *Relaxation and breathing exercises*
- *Practicing yoga*
- *Hypnotherapy*

It is really important to find something you enjoy doing such as exercise, reading or a hobby that helps you to relax and unwind. Putting aside some time to do this each day will help you feel less stressed. If you find it really hard to deal with stress and find yourself anxious a lot of the time you might want to consider structured stress relief techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or neuro linguistic programming (NLP).

## Practical Tips for managing stress:

- Identify your stress triggers: Take note of when you begin to feel stressed this will help you recognise what is causing your stress.
- When you have identified your stress triggers write them down including what you can do to address them. This will help you feel more in control and therefore less stressed.
- Exercise can help you cope better with the pressure of having IBD, it may also help improve your energy levels and quality of life. Exercising outdoors can be particularly beneficial for easing stress.
- Emotional support: just talking to a loved one could help you feel less stressed.
- Spending time with family and friends.
- Having an enjoyable hobby or past time.
- You are not alone: there are more than 20,000 people in Ireland with IBD, joining support groups and meeting other people who understand what you are going through can help you feel less stressed.
- Relaxation techniques: there are many techniques to help you relax, a quick and easy one that you can do at any time is conscious breathing.