

Hypnosis is twice as effective at relieving agonising symptoms of IBS than other methods, study reveals

- 'Gut-directed' therapy improved symptoms for up to 50% of people trialled
- Relaxing the brain could work better than current treatments for the stomach
- There is no cure for IBS which 10-15% of the population experience symptoms of

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Hypnosis could be an effective way of treating irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a study has suggested.

Researchers found 50 per cent of patients who received hypnotherapy after one year saw relief from their agonising symptoms.

In comparison, just 23 per cent of volunteers who had educational lessons on how to cope with the condition reported the same benefit, according to the Dutch trial.

There is no cure for the condition, believed to strike up to 15 per cent of people, according to global estimates.

Symptoms of IBS can range from abdominal pain to erratic bowel habits and even iron deficiency or vomiting in the most serious cases.



Irritable bowel syndrome could be relieved by hypnotherapy, a Netherlands study has revealed. Symptoms were relieved for 41 per cent of patients who received individual hypnotherapy, and 50 per cent for those who had group hypnotherapy, compared to 23 per cent who received 'educational support'

Experts say this method, of relaxing the brain to treat the gut, is proving to be successful in trials so far.

'Psychological treatment has shown a high success rate in improving IBS,' Dr Olafur Palsson of the Center for Functional GI and Motility Disorders, North Carolina, said.

'Using the brain to help the gut is a different mechanism than using medications that treat the gut directly.

'Fundamentally, if the usual medical approaches don't seem to be working well and you have persistent symptoms, this could be a good option.'

The study, led by the University Medical Center in Utrecht, enrolled 342 participants aged between 18 and 65 with IBS from 11 hospitals.

The patients were randomly assigned into three groups for the research, published in the journal *Lancet Gastroenterology and Hepatology*.

The first group of 142 patients received individual hypnotherapy, while the second group of 146 volunteers did group hypnotherapy.

Participants had the 45-minute long therapy sessions twice a week for six weeks. They included progressive relaxation and soothing imagery.

This 'gut-directed' therapy was based on treatment developed at the University Hospital of South Manchester in the UK in the 1980s.

Positive visualisation was given to patients while they were given suggestions about how they could gain control over their digestive system to reduce feelings of pain and discomfort.

They were also given a CD so they could practice self-hypnosis exercises at home for 15 for 20 minutes every day.

The third group, the control group, received 'educational supportive therapy'. This consisted of six-hour long sessions every two weeks in a group.

Coping mechanisms, complaints, and the impact on patients' social lives were discussed, and dietary information was given according to guidelines.

After three months, 41 per cent of those in the individual therapy reported an equate relief of symptoms, 33 per cent in the group hypnotherapy, compared to 17 per cent in the control group.

These benefits appeared to last for another nine months for those receiving hypnotherapy.

'Group therapy could allow many more patients to be treated for the same cost', the authors wrote in the medical journal.

Dr Carla Flik, who led the study, said: 'We do not know exactly how gut-directed hypnotherapy works.

'But it may change patients' mindset and internal coping mechanisms, enabling them to increase their control over autonomic body processes, such as how they process pain and modulate gut activity.'

People with more severe symptoms of IBS respond to this form of treatment, the authors said, as their condition is more complex with psychological causes.

Their own study did not demonstrate this, however. They said: 'These patients are more likely to fully engage in this time consuming form of treatment, which is often perceived as the last chance for improvement of the disease.'

Nothing has been definitively explained as the cause of IBS. It has largely been seen as psychosomatic - symptoms can be triggered by a stressful event or anxiety.

WHAT IS IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME?

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) vary between different people.

Most sufferers complain of:

- feeling bloated
- abdominal discomfort, or pain, which often comes in spasms
- erratic bowel movements
- bouts of diarrhea and constipation

CAUSES

There is no known cause for IBS.

Many people with IBS find that their symptoms can be affected by their diet, and their emotions, especially stress.

Studies suggest it could be caused by spasms in the colon.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

IBS can affect people of any age.

But it seems to be more common in young people.

Women are most commonly affected, with 60 percent of IBS sufferers female, compared to 40 percent male.

There is no cure for the condition, believed to strike up to 15 per cent of people, according to global estimates.

