

Suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome? Regular Exercise Is the Answer

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

November 29, 2024

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › IBS affects 10% to 15% of Americans and involves hypersensitive nerves in the gastrointestinal tract. While medications exist, they often come with harmful side effects
- › Exercise improves IBS by optimizing gut motility, increasing short-chain fatty acid production and modulating the immune system to reduce inflammation and pathogenic bacteria
- › The gut-brain axis plays a crucial role in IBS, with stress negatively impacting gut health. Exercise helps restore the connection between brain and gut
- › Moderate-intensity exercise, defined as being slightly winded but still able to carry on a conversation, is more beneficial than vigorous exercise for managing IBS symptoms
- › Yoga is particularly effective for IBS management, with specific poses recommended for different symptoms – corpse pose for constipation, wind-relieving pose for gas and gentle inversions for general relief

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is one of the most common digestive disorders in America. According to the American College of Gastroenterology, around 10% to 15% of the total population have this disease. It is also more common in women than men.¹

Why does IBS happen? As noted by Johns Hopkins Medicine, it's theorized that people with IBS generally have hypersensitive nerves on their gastrointestinal tract.² As for treatment, drugs are often the first option, such as Alosetron (Lotronex) and Eluxadoline

(Viberzi).³ However, these medications are often fraught with side effects and eventually harm your health further, which is why I don't recommend relying on them.

If drugs are out of the picture, then what's the next best strategy? As it turns out, moving your body — exercise — helps manage IBS. Even better, it's free and something you can do right away.

How Exercise Benefits IBS

The benefits of exercise for improved cardiovascular health,⁴ longer stamina⁵ and enhanced cognitive function⁶ have been well-documented already. Interestingly, a growing body of research shows that it also benefits your digestive health. But before going into the mechanisms involved, it's important to establish the context first. As explained in a report published by The New York Times:⁷

"IBS is caused by miscommunication between the brain and the gut, which leads to pain and bloating during the normal digestion process. For some people it primarily causes constipation, while others experience mostly diarrhea or a combination of the two."

That said, a study⁸ published in *Nutrients* investigated how exercise exerts a positive effect on IBS. The researchers divided the benefits into three different areas:

- **Intestinal transit time** — Exercise positively affects digestive health by encouraging better gut motility to help maintain optimal movement of digested food through the intestines. As you exercise, there's less time for digested food to spend time in the colon, thereby decreasing the risk of "harmful bacterial fermentation and the production of toxic metabolites."⁹
- **Short-chain fatty acid (SCFA) production** — Exercise boosts the production of SCFAs in the gut, which are produced when beneficial bacteria ferment dietary fiber. The SCFAs boost gut health by serving as a primary energy source for your colonocytes, which are the cells surrounding your colon.

SCFAs also exhibit anti-inflammatory effects that protect the integrity of the gut barrier, which is helpful in reducing intestinal inflammation – a common problem in IBS patients.¹⁰

- **Immune system modulation** – Your immune system begins to undergo positive changes when you start exercising. For example, it helps reduce inflammation while also enhancing mucosal immunity, which creates a positive effect for the gut microbiota.

Exercise also promotes the circulation of immune system cells that help remove pathogens, minimizing their risk of multiplying and creating disease. According to the researchers, "an overgrowth of pathogenic bacteria can lead to conditions such as small intestinal bacterial overgrowth and IBS."¹¹

Exercise Mediates the Link Between Your Gut and Brain

Your gut is often referred to as the "second brain." As such, when you undergo periods of psychological stress, your gut health will also go through the same experience. According to registered dietitian Destini Moody:¹²

"Prolonged stress can have many physiological effects that can adversely affect gut health like that overproduction of stomach acid that causes heartburn, digestion that moves too slowly or too quickly, and a disruption in the balance of good and bad bacteria in the gut."

There's compelling evidence showing the link between your gut and the brain, also known as the "gut-brain axis." Currently published evidence¹³ notes that the gut and brain communicate via "both fast-acting neural and delayed immune-mediated mechanisms in a bidirectional manner," and both respond to feedback from one another.

Subsequently, this connection is disrupted by a stressor, noticeable changes are felt. This mechanism is explained in a study¹⁴ published in *Frontiers in Cellular and Infection Microbiology*:

"Animal models of stress-related disorders showed critical changes in fecal and mucosal microbial composition, metabolites, immune gene expression in the terminal ileum, as well as in serum cytokine concentration. This suggests that the microbiota is sensitive to stress exposure and highlights the importance of analyzing the microbiota community composition by microbial niche ...

In addition, stress-induced mediators, such as the corticotropin-releasing factor, increased macromolecular permeability in the healthy human colon via corticotropin-releasing factor receptor on subepithelial mast cells."

In light of these findings, one strategy that you can implement right away to help reduce your stress levels is getting regular exercise. Going back to the report by The New York Times, exercise "can restore the connection between and the brain and impact IBS."¹⁵

According to a study published in the International Journal of Molecular Sciences,¹⁶ chronic stress, even at moderate levels, increases your risk of neuropsychiatric diseases, and to combat this issue, exercise is recommended. They noted that exercise exerts an anti-inflammatory effect, while also providing a boost in mood, memory, learning and central nervous system function.

Moderate-Intensity Exercise Is the Right Approach

If you've been sedentary for quite some time and looking to incorporate exercise, you're probably tempted to turn up the intensity right away to compensate. However, this is the wrong approach, as there's compelling evidence showing that moderate-intensity exercise is the optimal way to stay fit. Simply put, there's no need for you to engage in high-intensity exercise to stay healthy.

Dr. James O'Keefe, a cardiologist at St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, shared this discovery to me [when I interviewed him](#) after publishing his study in the Missouri Medicine journal.¹⁷ In fact, the findings were so profound that I drastically altered my exercise regimen. From his research, he noted that vigorous exercise, especially at long

periods (total of four to seven hours per week) didn't get any additional benefit compared to sedentary people.

Conversely, O'Keefe noted that moderate-intensity exercise, which is loosely defined as exerting enough effort to where you're slightly winded but can still carry on a conversation, is better and cannot be overdone. He also discovered that this people who follow this approach have double the improved reduction in long-term mortality compared to vigorous exercisers.

To gain the benefits of exercise for your gut health, it's important to stay committed to a regular schedule. Going back to the Nutrients study,¹⁸ the researchers emphasized this very point. They also noted the importance of working with a trained professional, as well as taking it easy at the beginning to prevent injury:

"Long-term exercise interventions provide sustained benefits, maintaining the gut microbiota's diversity and stability, supporting immune functions, and reducing systemic inflammation.

However, exercise programs must be tailored to individual needs to avoid exacerbating IBS symptoms. Personalized exercise plans starting with low-to-moderate intensity and gradually increasing in intensity can maximize the benefits and minimize risks."

Yoga – A Beneficial Way to Boosting Your Fitness and Digestive Health

According to The New York Times,¹⁹ most experts suggest trying calming exercises, such as walking and yoga to help manage IBS. And as it happens, O'Keefe mentions that yoga is a moderate-intensity exercise.²⁰ This means that not only will you be supporting your overall health, but you're also giving your digestive health a big boost.

Research²¹ also shows that yoga also has other benefits, such as improved body flexibility and immune function, maintained body weight and decreased stress levels,

which, again, is a risk factor for IBS.²² If your IBS constantly produces symptoms of constipation, here are four yoga poses that will help manage it, according to PACE Hospitals in India:²³

Corpse pose²⁴

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent or legs extended.
 2. Keep your head centered, not allowing to fall to either side.
 3. Extend your arms to the side.
 4. Breath smoothly in and out, closing your eyes and relaxing the muscles.
-

Bow pose²⁵

1. Begin on your belly with your legs hip-distance apart and your palms on the mat beside your lower ribs.
2. Extend your feet straight back and press down with the tops of all 10 toenails to activate your quadriceps.
3. Rotate your inner thighs toward the ceiling (to broaden your lower back) and firm your outer ankles into your midline (to prevent your feet from turning inward).
4. Keep your hands on the mat as you lift your head and chest a few inches off the mat and keep a slight tuck of your chin. Roll your shoulders back and up.
5. Bend your knees and reach back with your hands to clasp the outside of your ankles. (Be certain to reach back with both hands at the same time.) This hand position puts your shoulders in internal rotation, so roll your shoulders back and up again.
6. Press your thighs into the mat.
7. Keep your feet flexed and your outer ankles from bowing out. Press the bottoms of your feet up toward the ceiling to energize your legs.

8. Keep your thighs on the mat as you push your shins toward the wall behind you as you lift and open your chest. Roll your shoulders back again to reinforce the external rotation.
9. Lift your thighs off the mat. Begin with your inner thighs.
10. Relax your glutes.
11. Continue to press your shins back and away from your hands as you reach your sternum forward and up, balancing on your navel.
12. Lift your gaze slightly so the curve of your neck is a continuation of the curve of your upper back.
13. Hold for five to 10 breaths. To ease out of the pose, bend your knees and lower your legs to the floor. Then release your grip.

Fish pose²⁶

1. Lie down on your back, bend your knees with the soles of your feet on the floor, arms alongside the body, palms down.
2. Lift your hips and slide your hands underneath the upper buttocks.
3. Inhale and press into your elbows and shoulders, lifting the chest.
4. Depending on the intensity of your backbend, bring either the back or the top of the head to the floor. However, there should be very little weight on it.
5. If this feels stable, extend your legs out one at a time. Extend through the heels, with a slight inner rotation of the upper legs.
6. Stay for five breaths, breathing towards your chest and ribcage.
7. To come out of the pose, press your elbows down to lift your head and gently place your spine down on the mat.

Locust pose²⁷

-
1. Lie on your stomach with arms down by your sides, palms facing the floor. Extend your legs straight back with the tops of your feet pressed into the mat.
 2. Let your forehead rest naturally on the mat. Roll your shoulder blades down and back to open your chest.
 3. Inhale and lift your head, chest, and arms up from the ground. With arms extended straight back, stretch through all 10 fingers, and slightly turn your hands so that the thumbs point down.
 4. Exhale and lift your legs off the mat, leading with the inner thighs. With the buttocks slightly firm, drop the tailbone toward the ground.
 5. If lifting your arms and legs at the same time is too challenging, drop the legs back down to the floor and lift the upper body only. This is called the half locust pose.
 6. Focus your gaze on the floor and slightly in front of you to keep the back of your neck from crunching. Hold the locust pose for three to five breaths and then release out of the pose. In traditional yoga, yogis repeat these back extensions for three.
-

Three Yoga Poses for Diarrhea-Centric IBS

What if your IBS leans more toward diarrhea instead of constipation? PACE Hospitals recommends these yoga poses instead:²⁸

Half spinal twist²⁹

1. Sit with your legs stretched in front of you. Bend your left leg and place your left foot flat on the floor, just outside of your right knee.
2. Bring your left fingertips to the floor about a foot behind you. Gently push into the floor to lengthen your spine.
3. Reach your right arm up with an inhale.

4. Bend your right arm with an exhale, press the elbow against the left knee and twist to the left. Gaze over your left shoulder.
5. Hold the pose and take slow, deep breaths.
6. Untwist with an inhale. Change sides.

Triangle³⁰

1. Start in the mountain pose (Tadasana), meaning you're standing with your feet about hip-width distance apart, your legs straight, and your arms by your sides.
2. Extend your arms so they're parallel to the floor with your palms facing down. Step your feet 3 to 4 feet apart. It might feel better for your body to shorten or lengthen your stance, so play around and do what feels best.
3. If you start on the right side, point your right toes toward the front of the mat and angle your left foot, which is in the back, outward at a 45-degree angle.
4. Keep your torso facing the long edge of the mat as you take a deep inhale. As you exhale, bend at the hip joint to lower your torso over your right leg, touching your right hand to the floor (if possible) and reaching your top hand toward the ceiling. If you can't bring your bottom hand to the floor, let it rest on your shin or a yoga block. Your front and back leg should both be straight, with your weight pressing evenly through both feet.
5. Think about lengthening (not scrunching) at your waist and sending your tailbone toward your back heel, which should remain firmly grounded on the mat.
6. Gently turn your head to gaze at your top hand. Hold this position for three to five long, slow breaths.
7. Return to the starting position and repeat the above movements on the opposite side.

Wind-relieving³¹

-
1. Begin by lying on your back, with your legs and arms extended.
 2. As you exhale, draw both of your knees to your chest. Clasp your hands around them.
 3. While holding only your right knee, release your left leg and extend it along the floor. Hold this pose for up to one minute.
 4. Draw your left knee back in towards your chest and clasp your hands around both knees again.
 5. While holding only your left knee, release your right leg and extend it along the floor. Hold this pose for the same amount of time.
 6. Finally, draw both knees to your chest.
 7. With an exhalation, release and extend both.
-

Two Yoga Poses for Gas and Bloating IBS

If you're predominantly experiencing gas and bloating due to your IBS, PACE Hospitals recommends these two yoga poses:³²

Seated wide angle³³

1. From Dandasana/staff pose, bring your legs wide apart, up to a point where you feel a good stretch, but can still hold the pose, maintaining a straight spine, and without falling back.
2. Flex your feet, and keep your knees and toes pointed up towards the ceiling. Press your legs and sitting bones down and lengthen up through your spine.
3. With a long spine, bend from the hips. Place your hands between your legs on the floor, and slowly exhale as you start to walk your hands forwards.
4. Maintain length along the front of your body as you come further into the forward bend. If you feel you are starting to arch your back, don't lower any further.

5. Hold this pose for five to 10 breaths.
6. To come out of the pose, come up with a straight back, pressing your sitting bones down, as you exhale.

Gentle inversion³⁴

1. Place your yoga mat next to a wall with lots of open space. Make sure there are no TVs, framed pictures or wall decor blocking your wall space.
2. Come to sit next to the wall with your right hip pressing against it and your knees bent with your feet on the floor.
3. Place your hands behind your hips and lean your weight into them to lift your feet off the floor.
4. Swivel on your seat to face the wall and lift your legs up on it to rest against it. Simultaneously, release the weight of your torso onto the floor and relax downward.
5. Place your hands in any comfortable position and soften the weight of your legs down toward the floor.
6. Hold for as long as you'd like, gently focusing on your breath and slowing its rhythm as you allow gravity to assist venous return.

Sources and References

- ¹ American College of Gastroenterology, "Irritable Bowel Syndrome"
- ² Johns Hopkins Medicine, "Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)"
- ³ Mayo Clinic, "Irritable Bowel Syndrome"
- ⁴ Am J Prev Cardiol. 2022 Oct 13;12:100424, Abstract
- ⁵ Front Physiol. 2021 Aug 12;12:731858, Conclusion
- ⁶ Scientific Reports volume 13, Article number: 1140 (2023), Abstract
- ^{7, 15, 19} The New York Times, October 3, 2024
- ^{8, 18} Nutrients 2024, 16(16), 2657, Abstract
- ⁹ Nutrients 2024, 16(16), 2657, Intestinal Transit Time
- ¹⁰ Nutrients 2024, 16(16), 2657, SCFA Production

- ¹¹ [Nutrients 2024, 16\(16\), 2657, Modulation of the Immune System](#)
- ¹² [EatingWell, September 28, 2024](#)
- ¹³ [Fed Pract. 2021 Aug;38\(8\):356–362, Introduction](#)
- ¹⁴ [Front Cell Infect Microbiol. 2020 Sep 9;10:468, Microbial Modulation of Immunity and Homeostasis](#)
- ¹⁶ [Int J Mol Sci. 2022 Nov 1;23\(21\):13348, Abstract](#)
- ¹⁷ [Mo Med. 2023 Mar-Apr;120\(2\):155–162, Abstract](#)
- ²⁰ [Mo Med. 2023 Mar-Apr;120\(2\):155–162, Other Fitness Dimensions: Balance, Flexibility, Body Composition](#)
- ²¹ [J Ayurveda Integr Med. 2021 Feb 3;12\(1\):102–106, Abstract](#)
- ²² [Front Cell Infect Microbiol. 2020 Sep 9;10:468, Background](#)
- ^{23, 28, 32} [PACE Hospitals, “9 Yoga Poses and Exercise for Irritable Bowel Syndrome \(IBS\) Patients”](#)
- ²⁴ [Yoga Journal, “The Subtle Struggle of Savasana”](#)
- ²⁵ [Yoga Journal, “Bow Pose”](#)
- ²⁶ [Ekhart Yoga, “Fish Pose – Matsyasana”](#)
- ²⁷ [MasterClass, “Locust Pose: Step-by-Step Instructions for Salabhasana”](#)
- ²⁹ [Yoga 15, “Half Spinal Twist”](#)
- ³⁰ [One Peloton, March 13, 2024](#)
- ³¹ [Everyday Yoga, November 10, 2023](#)
- ³³ [Ekhart Yoga, “Wide-Angle Seated Forward Bend - Upavishta Konasana”](#)
- ³⁴ [YogaUOnline, July 31, 2023](#)