

Royal Hospital for
Sick Children

Irritable Bowel Syndrome



Booklet 2: Stress, worries and excitement

What is stress and why does it happen?

The body has a physical and emotional reaction to circumstances that frighten, annoy, confuse or excite us.

Thousands of years ago we needed to have this response to survive! Our cavemen ancestors lived in a world where people needed to respond to danger quickly, without thinking - for instance, if they came across hungry tigers or forest fires.

This quick response is known as a 'fight or flight response' and is our body's prehistoric, automatic and natural way of preparing us to fight or flee from what we think is an attack or could harm us or be a threat to our survival.



Obviously, we're now thousands of years on and don't often come across such dangerous things as tigers or forest fires. Most 'threats' today are much less obvious and include things like tests, or arguments with parents or friends.

Nonetheless, our bodies respond to these things in the same chemical way they would have reacted to the tiger long ago – our muscles tense, our hearts pound, and we breathe faster, etc.

This can be helpful in some situations – for example, running when you're being chased, giving you an extra burst of energy to finish the last mile of a bike ride, or making you mentally more alert to pass a test.

However, sometimes getting stressed can get your body supercharged but there is no direct way to 'fight or flee' the situation. This is where stress can build up and start to affect your body, sometimes by irritating your bowels!

Feeling excited (for example, about a birthday or outing) can also make your body behave in the same way.



What changes do you notice in your body when you feel stressed or excited?

Match the words to the picture.

headaches

dry throat

cold sweats

wide eyes

short breaths

chattering teeth

pounding heart

goose bumps

tight stomach

'butterflies' in tummy

cold hands

shaky knees

cold feet



Managing stress

Once you recognise that you're feeling stressed, there are several things you can do. Learning how to handle stress can help, whether you have IBS or not. Here are some things that we know help people deal with stress:

Talk to someone: one way to handle stress is to talk about your problems with other people, such as parents, friends or teachers — and, if it's a medical problem, your doctor. Bring up what's been on your mind and how it makes you feel. An adult may have ideas about how to solve whatever is worrying you or making you uncomfortable.

Talking to your friends might mean you discover they are worried about the same test or have had similar problems, such as dealing with parents separating, or the death of a beloved pet. It might sound funny but just talking to someone can make you — and your irritable bowels — feel better!



Express your feelings: It's easy to let your feelings go wild when you're upset. Notice your feelings, and name them – for example: "I am so angry!"

Say or think about why you feel that way. Then, find a way to calm down and get past the upset feelings. Things that might help you are relaxing (see booklet 3), listening to music, writing about how you feel in a journal, playing with a pet, and going for a walk or a bike ride.

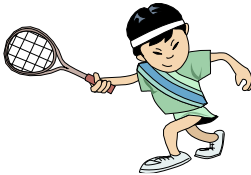
Do whatever helps you shift to a better mood.



Find a balance: Are you too busy? If you're feeling tired and stressed because you have too much going on, like lots of after-school activities, you might feel better if you drop something, even if it's just for a little while.

Sometimes lots of activities — even if they're all fun — can make you feel stressed by keeping you busy all the time.

However, it's important to get the balance right, as doing some (but not too many!) after-school activities may actually help you relax and feel better. Similarly, if you're only dealing with school stuff and have no time to have fun or chill-out, you can get stressed. By keeping a balance and taking care of yourself by getting enough sleep and food, you'll probably feel less stressed out!



We would be very grateful for your feedback on these booklets. Please visit:

www.surveymonkey.com/s/8Y9JSNP for parent or carers, or
www.surveymonkey.com/s/6DWST9M for young people.

Many thanks

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