

IBS affects women's quality of life more than men's

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Double work and a high embarrassment factor can lead to the quality of life being affected more among women than men by irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), a very common gastrointestinal disease. Even with the same level of physical pain and other symptoms, women's perceived quality of life is worse than the mens, according to new research.

"Even if the similarities are larger than the differences, there is a pattern of differences between men and women with IBS," confirms Ida Björkman, Licensed Nurse and researcher in person-centered care at Sahlgrenska Academy.

Between 10 and 15 percent of the population meets the diagnosis criteria for IBS, a condition with an irritable bowel and varying degrees of pain, abdominal swelling, gas, diarrhea and constipation.

However, many refrain from seeking care. In some cases, because the symptoms are not so severe, but also because sufferers do not like to talk about the problems.

Gas and swelling

"You have gas, your stomach swells, you don't know what to wear and think 'I look so fat'. All of this affects women's quality of life more than the men's," says Ida Björkman

Her dissertation is based on studies of more than 500 IBS patients with medium to severe symptoms, which sometimes also lead to sickness absence from [work](#). In the follow-up interview studies, it clearly came forth that men and women are affected in slightly different ways.

"The gastrointestinal symptoms are associated with many taboos, which were harder for the women to handle; the men had a more relaxed attitude to their symptoms," says Ida Björkman.

"We also already know that stress worsens IBS. The men described work and family finances as stress factors while the women felt that they did double work and had a second shift of household work when they came home from work. This negative stress can affect the stomach in both sexes and the problems worsen," she continues.

Health diary

Ida Björkman describes the IBS sufferers as a patient group with an extremely good grasp of what they eat and do not eat, and they always have a coin in their pocket to quickly be able to go to public toilets if necessary.

The healthcare services can also play an important role for developing everyday strategies in her opinion. In one of the partial studies, a small patient group was visited twice by a nurse for person-centered support, with a follow-up visit or phone call, and kept a special health diary on their own. More studies are needed to evaluate the set-up, but the direction is clear:

"A partnership needs to be established between care provider and patient, and each individual life situation needs to be addressed. It takes more time than a regular consultation of 20 minutes, but if it reduces the suffering and means that the patients do not need as much care later on,

it's a good investment," says Ida Björkman.

More information: gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/44870

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