

# Mediterranean diet could help people with irritable bowel symptoms

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New research looking at the benefits of a Mediterranean diet for people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) has yielded surprising results.

Not only did the [diet](#), rich in fruits, vegetables and legumes, improve the mental health of the study participants, but their gastrointestinal symptoms improved, as well.

Dr. Heidi Staudacher, National Health and Medical Research Council Emerging Leadership Fellow at Deakin University's Food & Mood Center, said it was common for people with IBS to avoid some of the foods important in a Mediterranean diet as they are known to trigger a worsening of symptoms.

"Previously we had an understanding that foods such as legumes, certain whole grains and onion, can worsen gut symptoms in some people," Dr. Staudacher said.

"This research suggests there might be a new way to help reduce the burden of IBS symptoms that doesn't focus on cutting out foods that are known to be important for good health."

Dr. Staudacher's [research](#), published in *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics*, measured outcomes of 59 people over six weeks who were either following the Mediterranean diet via counseling from a dietitian or eating their usual diet (control group).

"Previous research has shown the Mediterranean diet improves [depressive symptoms](#) and we wanted to see whether this type of diet was possible for people with IBS, and also whether it would improve both depressive and gut symptoms in people with IBS," Dr. Staudacher said.

"Many people with IBS also have [mental health problems](#) like anxiety and depression. Given the known gut-brain connection, it is plausible that if we can improve people's mental health this might then lead to improvements in the gut symptoms that people with IBS live with."

The study found:

- 83% of participants on the Mediterranean diet had a reduction in their IBS-SSS score (gut symptom severity score) throughout the trial compared with only 37% in the [control group](#),
- Depressive symptoms were lower in the Mediterranean diet compared with controls at the end of the study. This is in line with other research using a Mediterranean diet in people with depression,
- Somewhat surprisingly, [gastrointestinal symptoms](#) were also lower in the Mediterranean diet group compared with controls.

"These findings suggest we may be able to look beyond current dietary advice for people with IBS and encourage a broadly health-promoting diet to help manage their symptoms. We now urgently need to conduct a bigger study that compares a Mediterranean diet to a better control diet to give us more clarity about its effect on gut and psychological symptoms," Dr. Staudacher said.

"Dietitians will also need to be involved, to help people increase high fiber and high FODMAP foods gradually into their diets to avoid triggering gut symptoms."

**More information:** Heidi M. Staudacher et al, Clinical trial: A Mediterranean diet is feasible and improves gastrointestinal and psychological symptoms in irritable bowel syndrome, *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/apt.17791](https://doi.org/10.1111/apt.17791)

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